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Welcome to the Outback: The Paradoxes of Living and Teaching in Remote Western Australian Schools

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Abstract

Teaching in remote schools can prove to be a challenging experience. Twenty three teachers from remote schools, located in Western Australia, were interviewed about their teaching and living experiences in isolated communities. The interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding three areas: demographic information; reasons for applying for a position in an isolated school and living in a remote community; and, professional factors impacting on the respondents.

Interviews were conducted during a residential professional development session and involved twenty-three teachers with wide ranging ages and teaching experience. These teachers identified a number of affective factors including what attracted them to teach in remote communities, what they liked and disliked about their lifestyle and why they decided to stay in the community in which they lived and taught. Professional factors identified included teaching and learning issues; curriculum and assessment; catering for individual needs; liaising with Aboriginal Education Workers; engaging and managing students; pedagogical issues and professional development. Teachers also identified the professional benefits and challenges of teaching in remote communities.

The article concludes with a short discussion on the paradoxes of living and teaching in isolated locations, followed by outlining three recommendations derived from the interview data.

Introduction

This paper discusses data from a research project that investigated aspects of teaching in remote schools. Using an interpretive approach, the researchers investigated two broad areas: background information about the participants and the professional, economic, personal, pedagogical and leadership aspects of their current positions. Relevant literature is explored, followed by an overview of the study. The research questions form the basis for the organisation of the section on 'Findings and Discussion', with the final two sections comprising a conclusion and recommendations for action.

Literature Review

One of the foremost educational challenges for communities in rural and remote Australia has been the ability to attract and retain teachers (Hudson & Millwater 2010; Graham, Miller & Patterson, 2009; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Roberts, 2004; Vinson, 2002, Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999). Australian states such as New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria have experienced significant problems in staffing rural and isolated schools (MCEETYA, 2001; Halsey, 2005). In particular, a lack of teachers in mathematics, science, and special education (Appleton, 1998; Herrington & Herrington, 2001; White, 2006; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999) has been reported. In Western Australia, the Department of Education and Training has identified continuing location and specialist teacher imbalances (Department of Education, 2010; Department of Education & Training [DET], 2006), with the former commenting that by 2015 the state could be facing a shortfall of up to 3,000 teachers. Thus, the expected shortfall coupled with the present difficulty in attracting teachers to rural and remote areas suggests major problems in staffing for many rural and remote schools. Within the first five years of rural and regional practice, geographic isolation and lack of access to professional development is likely to result in many professionals leaving their professions in country placements (Herrington & Herrington, 2001). Sharplin (2002) explored the issue of professional development in some detail and discovered that the respondents (pre-service teachers) to her survey expected to face challenges within their professional domain including professional isolation and lack of professional development days. A study of teachers in remote schools in Western Australia (Lock & Forlin, 2004; Lock & Forlin, 2006) also found that a lack of professional development opportunities was viewed with concern by teachers. These findings were reinforced by the SiMERR National Survey (Pegg, 2007), which found that schools in rural areas had "… higher unmet needs for professional development, …" (p. 4). In other words, limited access to professional learning could be a barrier to both accepting and remaining in teaching positions in rural, regional and remote locations.

Many rural schools across Australia face regular and sustained staff turnover, with studies revealing that this challenge has existed and persisted over a considerable period of time (Roberts, 2004; Halsey, 2005; Pegg, 2007; Green, 2009). The reasons for high staff turnover are varied, with Sharplin's (2002) study of pre-service teacher's perceptions of rural life showing a lack of clear understanding about teaching and living in rural communities. She found that views were often extreme: from the romantic notion of green, rolling hills to

decaying, drought stricken sites. Other reasons for staff shortages include teachers' beliefs about geographical, social, cultural, and professional isolation; inadequate housing; and a lack of preparation for multi-age classrooms, (Collins, 1999; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; McClure, Redfield & Hammer, 2003), with a report in *The Age* (26 February, 2007 as cited in Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 67) referring to classroom burnout being caused by lack of job security, student management, salary, lack of social status and community expectations.

More recently, Starr and White (2008), reinforced some of the above findings when their study showed that while teachers (and leading teachers) in rural areas face similar issues to those on metropolitan locations, they also encounter real and imagined perceptions regarding access to professional learning and classroom resources, together with personal and professional isolation. In addition, these two researchers also highlight the demands placed on rural teachers due to their visibility in the community, and the impact of living in rural communities struggling to survive and adapt to change.

There is evidence that some rural schools and communities have good teacher retention rates (i.e. more than three years), and of targeted mentoring programs and leadership approaches in some schools that are beginning to produce extended tenure of staff (Williams, 2004). Data from a current ongoing study into teacher retention in rural schools, as reported by Lock, Reid, Green, Hastings, Cooper and White (2009) and White, Lock, Hastings, Reid, Green and Cooper (2009), also show the importance of school leadership, mentoring and professional learning, and the role of the community as being important influences on teachers willing to stay in schools located in non-metropolitan areas. Teachers noted the importance of a strong, supportive and strategic principal. In particular, graduate teachers commented on being aware of the principal's interest in them, particularly the concern about settling into a new community and school, and valuing what they brought to the school and the community, rather than prescribing what they should do. These graduate teachers observed that they appreciated being allowed to learn through trial and error and to ask questions in a safe and supportive environment. Principals also played a key role by encouraging new teachers to make their own community connections and using strategies such as providing information about community activities both prior to and after their arrival and, in some cases, explicit introductions to the community.

Teachers also referred to the positive impact of being mentored (Lock et al., 2009; White et al., 2009), yet the researchers observed that there was typically no formal mentoring program

in place in any of the schools visited as part of this study. Despite this lack of formality, mentoring appears to contribute to staff retention, with new teachers being given opportunities to establish their own working and professional relationships, knowing that they could seek support and advice from someone in a non-line managerial role. Green (2009) acknowledges the role of induction and mentoring by stating that its importance "needs to be stressed" (p. 4).

The importance of community involvement was noted by both newly appointed and experienced teachers as contributing to developing a sense of "belonging" to the town. Lock et al. (2009) and White et al. (2009) commented about community members recognising the importance of providing on-going support for teachers, with the latter expressing appreciation for the way in which they were made to feel welcome. A common observation was the importance placed by the community in supporting the school and vice versa; schools often being the site of community events. Thus, the intertwining of school and community appears to be mutually beneficial and contributing to developing among teachers a sense of being part of something worthwhile. In some instances school community members explicitly promoted themselves to newly arrived teachers, and in doing so highlighted their own resources or actively created the opportunities to encourage new teachers to remain.

Research which further investigated the issues of teaching (in remote schools in particular) was undertaken in April of 2009, and concentrated primarily on schools located in remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia's North-West Pilbara and Kimberley regions. Research investigating school leadership issues was also concurrently undertaken, however, this forms the basis of another paper.

Methodology

This study investigated aspects of teaching in remote schools. Using an interpretive approach (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006), with structured and semi-structured interviews, the investigators obtained data on:

1. Background information about 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.

The three research questions that guided this investigation were:

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 and leadership aspects of their current positions?

From these broad research questions, both structured and semi-structured interview questions were developed, which covered three specific areas. First, demographic information to provide 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, professional benefits and challenges, and professional development. A total of twenty three teachers, all of whom were volunteers attending a conference on remote education, were interviewed over the course of the study and pseudonyms have been used throughout the discussion of the findings. The interview transcripts were read and re-read to identify emerging themes (Gall et al., 2006). What follows is a synopsis of what these interviews revealed.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper comprises four main sub-sections: demographic information about the study participants; information pertaining to affective factors; discussion about professional factors; and, professional benefits and challenges. Within the sub-sections relating to affective and professional factors, paradoxes are evident in that identified issues were viewed from both positive and negative perspectives.

Demographic Information

Twenty-three teachers from remote schools were interviewed: ten were male and thirteen female. The age of those interviewed ranged from early twenties to mid sixties, with most being below thirty years of age. There was a similar range of teaching experience in the group which covered new graduates in their first week of teaching to those with up to forty

years of classroom experience, with the majority having less than five years of teaching experience. For some, this teaching job had been their only experience. Others had varying degrees of experience teaching in urban schools and one teacher had spent many years in a number of remote communities across Western Australia.

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 being continually added over the years, so certain sections were quite new, while others were somewhat older. The schools seem generally to be maintained well. One teacher noted that there was "quite a bit of pride" and the school contained "well looked after grounds" and was "very clean".

Affective factors

What attracted teachers to work in remote communities?

Each teacher interviewed had varied and personal reasons for applying to teach in a remote setting. The reasons they provided can be grouped into five broad themes: an interest in teaching in remote communities; a desire for personal challenge and change; word of mouth or invitation to apply; a desire to make a contribution; and being inspired by practicum experience while at university. The most common theme to emerge was an interest in working with children in a remote setting. Thirteen teachers (all names used are pseudonyms) gave this reason and it was expressed in comments such as:

> "Since the beginning of uni I have been following indigenous issues." (Darren)

"I have always wanted to work with indigenous people." (Karena)

"[The] excitement I suppose working with remote children." (Marley)

"It's always been my dream to work in a non suburban kind of non city school".

(Adam)

The prospect of a change and taking on a challenge also appealed to seven of the teachers. Amy commented: "It was like going to a different country –a bit of a challenge". Leah felt that she needed a change and wanted to experience a different way of teaching, and Natalie wanted a change that would better suit her family life.

Four teachers said that they applied for the position because they already knew someone who was teaching in the community and it had been suggested that they should apply. Three teachers cited a desire to make a contribution as their reason for applying to teach in a remote community with Ruth commenting that she had been looking into doing voluntary work overseas in developing countries before deciding to apply for a teaching position in a remote community.

Other factors that enticed teachers to apply for a position in a remote area included two who stated that practicum experiences at university had ignited an interest in teaching in remote areas. One of these respondents noted that the enthusiasm shown by a lecturer had been enough to make remote teaching seem like a real possibility.

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

The teachers described many reasons why they liked living in a remote community. These have been grouped into five categories: accommodation, being accepted by the community, family benefits, lifestyle and the natural environment.

Twelve of the respondents noted that their accommodation was very good with comments such as: 'better than expected', 'comfortable and cheap', 'great', and 'excellent' being made. In some communities accommodation was available for visitors. This not only reduced the sense of isolation, it created the opportunity to visit, which could serve to reassure parents of young teachers that they were safe and happy. One teacher commented that her parents had such a good time when they visited that they immediately started planning their next visit.

Acceptance by the community was acknowledged by eleven teachers as a favourable factor. Common interests such as playing football can help teachers to settle in and become part of the community. Some teachers noted that it takes a while to be accepted, but in the words of

one "it's worthwhile sticking around; you'll get a lot more out of it". Others enjoyed living in an 'open, friendly' community where they felt welcome and supported; an observation not dissimilar to the findings of Lock et al. (2009) and White et al. (2009).

Five teachers noted the family benefits of living in a remote community, but for dichotomous reasons. Some enjoyed being able to spend more time together as a family and others enjoyed being away from family and having greater independence. Lifestyle was a benefit noted by four teachers who enjoyed 'moving away from the rat-race', 'being away from materialism' and taking the opportunity to enjoy the natural environment and go camping during the cooler months.

When it came to considering dislikes, there were four common factors that most teachers identified: cost of living, remoteness from friends and family, lack of privacy, and access to goods and services. Other factors identified by smaller groups of teachers were poor accommodation, the natural environment and community issues.

By far the greatest dislike was the cost of living, with this issue attracting unfavourable comments from seventeen teachers. For many teachers their accommodation was cheap, but this was offset by the high costs of groceries, utilities, fuel and travel. Several teachers commented that access to the internet reduced their sense of isolation, but that the cost could be high. A problem that was specific to newly qualified teachers starting out with little money was the need, in some locations, to shop for a term at a time. One teacher described how she had to beg and borrow money to buy provisions for the first term and by the end of the term was living on rice and very little else.

Ten of the teachers said that they disliked the remoteness from family and friends – some missed family, some missed friends and some missed both. Previous research conducted by Collins (1999), Hudson & Hudson (2008), McClure et al. (2003), and Starr and White (2009) also discussed social isolation as contributing to staff shortages in non-metropolitan locations. Two of the teachers spoke about a sense of dislocation or disconnectedness as a result of living across two very different worlds.

A lack of privacy was an issue for ten of the teachers, which was consistent with the findings of Starr and White (2009) who highlighted the impact of teacher visibility in the community. Rachel, a very experienced teacher, commented that in a small community, privacy is certainly an issue because everybody knows everybody else's business. However, the lack of privacy did not just extend to knowing each other's business, it was also about teachers

feeling they were constantly 'on show' with people knocking on the door and looking in windows.

Nine teachers commented unfavourably on access to goods and services, an issue linked to being geographically isolated, which has been discussed in previous research (Collins, 1999; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; McClure et al., 2003). The comments ranged from missing simple pleasures like coffee and newspapers to potentially more serious problems such as an unreliable internet service, disruptions to electricity supply and a shortage of water. The availability of fresh food was limited, particularly in communities with no shops. Access to medical services was also limited with visits by doctors and nurses varying in frequency between communities.

Six teachers were unhappy with their accommodation, an issue also noted by Collins (1999), Hudson & Hudson (2008) and McClure et al. (2003). Their complaints included that the house had been left filthy by a previous tenant and in another case there were gaps between the walls making it impossible to keep bugs out.

Three of the teachers disliked aspects of the natural environment such as snakes, the heat and the heavy rain during the wet season, which could cut off communities for weeks at a time. Two teachers noted that they were uncomfortable with community issues such as violence and swearing.

Why Teachers Thought about Leaving and Why They Chose to Stay

The teachers were asked if they had ever contemplated leaving their current position and if so, why. Two teachers said that they had not considered leaving, but everyone else 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. 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.

Exhaustion and stress were by far the greatest pressure points. Hudson and Hudson (2008) noted a report in *The Age* which acknowledged the impact of classroom burnout among teachers in rural locations and a similar phenomenon was revealed in this study. Twelve teachers gave 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. Two teachers also commented on the emotionally draining aspect of seeing evidence of physical, sexual and mental abuse in the children.

Issues of staff conflict were also discussed by the teachers. In most cases the discussion did not relate to their current situation, but to problems that had occurred in previous years. Examples were given of teachers who had left because they 'did not fit in with other staff' or because of conflict with a previous principal. Two teachers discussed teacher/principal conflict in the context of their current situation, describing a sense of being overly scrutinised in a small community where everyone has to live and work in close proximity.

Six of the twenty-three teachers interviewed stated that isolation from friends and family had, at some stage, made them think about leaving, however, everyone interviewed had chosen to stay and the main reason for this as far as the teachers were concerned was their attachment to the children. They discussed the naturalness of the children and the importance of having someone who cared about them. Four teachers commented on the resilience of the children, including one who felt 'inspired by how they cope in such extreme circumstances.' Altogether twelve teachers cited their attachment to the children as a reason to stay and this was by no means a one-way attachment. As one teacher remarked, "The children love their teachers and vice versa." A number of teachers commented that this strong bond would make it very difficult to leave when the time came.

Job satisfaction was a prominent factor in teachers' decisions to stay, citing an enjoyment of the variety and challenges that came with the job and also discussed aspects such as the opportunities for professional development and to develop leadership skills.

Five teachers gave attachment to the community as a reason for not leaving, a finding similar to that reported by Lock et al. (2009) and White et al. (2009). 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 – the teacher cannot do it.

Lifestyle was an important factor in persuading three teachers to stay in the remote community. The stunning natural environment and the peace and quiet were listed as advantages. Three teachers also mentioned that having some autonomy was something they valued.

Professional Factors

Teaching and Learning Issues

The twenty-three teachers interviewed identified a number of teaching and learning issues, some of which they had not foreseen before commencing the position. The challenges they identified can be grouped into in six broad categories: curriculum and assessment; catering for the individual needs of children; working effectively with Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs); engaging and managing children; pedagogical issues; and language issues.

Curriculum and assessment

A majority of the teachers were from outside the state of Western Australia or even from outside Australia and many reported that they had found the WA Curriculum Framework and supporting documents difficult to comprehend and utilise on arrival at the school; they had not received professional development in the Curriculum Framework or how to modify it for the needs of Aboriginal children in remote settings. Some of the teachers were trained as secondary teachers and had found themselves working in primary or even early childhood contexts, and had experienced difficulty in getting to know all eight curriculum areas and implementing the Curriculum Framework in their particular situation.

The relevance of the Curriculum Framework for children in remote community schools was called into question by several respondents: for example, one teacher noted that concepts such as four seasons or traffic lights are not relevant to students living in many remote communities in the north of Western Australia, since there are no traffic lights and seasons there are only wet and dry. A teacher of many years experience described the English curriculum as 'at odds' with student needs.

A further comment made by one teacher was the lack of cultural understanding shown by external assessments such as the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN). These assessments can incorporate material considered to be irrelevant or

inappropriate to the students and this was seen to heavily disadvantage the students and, perhaps, not be representative of their level of understanding.

Catering for individual needs

It is well documented (e.g. Zubrick et al., 2006) that Aboriginal children have a far higher rate of low academic performance that do non-Aboriginal children, with 57% of Aboriginal children performing at low levels. Low levels of achievement among the children was seen as a highly significant challenge for several of the teachers interviewed, and one teacher stated that no child in the K-10 school could read above a year three level. One secondary teacher interviewed stated that he had received no training in how to teach children to learn and write, although in his particular context some competency in this area would be highly valuable.

Three of the teachers interviewed mentioned that catering for children of multiple ages and diverse abilities was a challenge. Furthermore, the incidence of learning disorders was much higher than anticipated by some teachers. Conditions such as dyslexia, foetal alcohol syndrome and dyspraxia were mentioned and assisting such children was seen to require specialist knowledge. Although the teachers had modified their programs as well as their pedagogies, they did not always feel confident about their practices. One teacher commented that even though the numbers in the classroom were small, many of the students had specific special needs and much of the teaching had to be done 'one to one'.

In addition to the teaching issues faced by the teachers, the need to provide pastoral care for students was also noted. Students could come to school without having eaten, resulting in the school providing food in order to fulfil that basic need before students could begin to learn.

In relation to some of the above issues, one teacher, Leanne, said, "A lot of them don't know how to hold a book and turn the pages so you have to kind of go right back to the start. I was teaching Year One and I had a student who didn't know how to hold a book … Some of the kids wander around until two or three in the morning and walk around with the older kids in the community; no bed time. That is a struggle. Sometimes they have no breakfast or, if they do, it's a can of Sprite and a biscuit."

Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs)

Eleven of the teachers interviewed (almost 50%) reported that they had encountered issues in working with Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs), who are paraprofessionals from the community who assist in a variety of ways in classroom teaching. Although the teachers

highly valued the AEWs' knowledge about the children, language and local community, they felt that they had not been adequately prepared in working effectively with them. One said that she would like to work more closely with her AEW and would like some training in how to develop better communications so as to build greater collaboration. Communication with AEWs was something also mentioned by other respondents. Another reported that she had learnt that there were gender issues to take into account; male AEWs prefer to speak to male teachers and females to females. The comments from these teachers suggest the provision of professional development opportunities being provided with respect to establishing relationships with AEWs would be useful. In previous research (for example, Herrington & Herrington, 2001; Sharplin, 2002; Lock & Forlin, 2004, 2006; Pegg, 2007), lack of professional development opportunities had been observed with concern by teachers in rural and remote locations.

Other respondents noted that AEWs were often barely trained, if at all and that there is a high turnover rate. Because of the relatively small financial advantage involved in becoming an AEW, it is often not seen to be an attractive employment option by community members. One teacher, Judy said of the AEWs she had worked with, "The old ones are very smart. She [my new one] is catching up, I should say. Old ones are helpful. New ones, sometimes they don't really know what they are supposed to do."

Engagement

Eight of the teachers interviewed reported that they found it difficult to engage and manage the children. The irregular attendance of children presented them with difficulties when it came to creating coherent plans and programs. Some of the teachers reported that they never knew who was going to turn up for school and from one day to the next they might have an entirely different group of children in class. This made it particularly difficult to effectively plan ahead for group learning since the whole group would rarely be in class at the same time. Due to their irregular attendance, children missed much of what the teacher had planned and consequently fell further behind.

Four of the teachers indicated that motivating the children was a significant issue for them and three identified behaviour management as a particular difficulty, especially during their first year of teaching in remote community schools; the strategies they had been taught at university or used elsewhere were not always effective in the context of remote community schools. Rachael reported, "One thing I noticed, they are not interested in learning and there's

no motivation. As a teacher, I try my best to make them really learn and then sometimes they give up, 'Oh man, isn't that boring? They say, 'Miss, it's boring, Miss, we don't want to do this.' They swear, but I don't take it personal."

In relation to behaviour management, an aspect discussed by Hudson and Hudson (2008), Leanne reported, "With these kids, a lot of them don't know you are angry unless you show them you are angry. You are told [at university] never yell at the kids, always talk to them. If you say 'I am disappointed with you, that's wrong,' you know it will go over their heads. A lot of body language and emotion is needed. If you are angry you have to show them – raise your voice. You are taught never raise your voice but you come up here and you have to do it."

Pedagogical issues

The need to alter their teaching style and strategies was a common issue amongst the teachers. Upon commencing work at the school, many had found that their style was not appropriate for either cultural or educational reasons. They highlighted a need for flexibility that was somewhat contrary to what they had been taught about planning for children's learning. One graduate teacher also noted that he had found it particularly difficult to teach multiple age groups within the same class as he had not experienced this in his university pre-service education course.

Another teacher noted the need to be very 'direct and specific', which was not in line with pedagogies taught at university, and another commented that teacher-centred pedagogy worked best in his context and that inquiry learning was not effective. Another observed that hands on, visual learning activities were most effective. Several teachers mentioned that the *National Accelerated Literacy Plan* (NALP), with its predictable routines and ability to cater for children with low attendance rates, had helped them teach literacy.

Regarding pedagogical issues Leanne said, "You can't write things on the board and expect them to read it. Group work, they find hard. At my school I find you can't tell them to work in pairs. They struggle with it. Most of them come from the same houses and families and get into fights and it ends in disaster. They don't work by themselves either."

Language issues

Language issues were mentioned by six of the respondents as presenting a particular challenge. One early childhood teacher said that many children arrive at school with no English language and that she, having had no English as a Second Language (ESL) training, had been obligated to devise strategies of her own to teach English to the children. Teachers from one of the schools reported that they had started to learn the children's traditional language and that this had proven to be beneficial in the classroom. One teacher reported that children would sometimes speak to each other in their traditional language as a means of excluding her.

The teachers interviewed seemed to hold a variety of views about the place of children's traditional languages in the classroom. Some schools reported that they deliver part of their teaching in traditional languages, with the assistance of AEWs. In other classrooms, the teacher insists on Standard Australian English, "They always speak English in the classroom. I tell them you're not in your village, speak English."

Professional Development (PD)

The teachers reported that they had generally found the Professional Development (PD) they had participated in useful, but that it did not go far enough. Thirteen of the teachers (57%) reported that they had received PD in National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) and ten reported that they had received some cultural awareness PD prior to commencing their job. Others had not received this because they had not commenced their position at the beginning of the year or for a range of other reasons. Only four teachers reported that they had also received PD in other areas, such as Reading Recovery, Science, Writing, ICT and Mathematics.

Nine of the teachers requested more cultural awareness PD, and some suggested that this should be specific to the community, since there is considerable variation in cultural mores and expectations. The vast majority of the teachers who had participated in NALP PD had found this useful. This PD involved some in-school sessions over several consecutive days, which were seen as highly effective. Eleven of the teachers had received informal, in-school PD from colleagues, and had found this beneficial.

Nine of the teachers stated that they would like more PD in pedagogical strategies, especially behaviour management techniques for teaching Aboriginal children in remote contexts. Three asked for more PD on helping Aboriginal children who had health issues, and four mentioned the need for PD on coping in highly stressful situations. Two would have liked more

information on surviving physically in remote rural areas, such as how to drive a four wheel drive vehicle and first aid for incidents such a snake bites and broken bones.

In general, the findings of the present research regarding professional development are not dissimilar to those discussed in the literature review (for example, Herrington & Herrington, 2002; Pegg, 2007) the main difference being that the teachers involved in this study identified a lack of professional learning specifically targeted toward contextual issues associated with teaching in remote locations.

Professional Benefits and Challenges

The benefits perceived by the teachers interviewed can be grouped into four main categories: autonomy; opportunities for professional growth; team spirit/collaboration; relationships with community.

The most notable professional benefit was 'team spirit', with this being mentioned by twelve of the teachers. Many commented about supportive principals and colleagues, and the need to 'pull together' to survive both professionally and personally. 'Opportunities for professional growth' was mentioned by five of the teachers, who had been compelled to find new ways of doing things because of the challenging teaching and learning context. Mary, a very experienced teacher, noted, "I've had huge professional growth." A greater level of autonomy was perceived by one teacher, who liked being able to be innovative. 'Relationships with the community' was seen as a professional benefit by five of the teachers interviewed. They valued being accepted into the community, which their role as teacher permitted, although acceptance took some time to develop.

Teachers mentioned more challenges than benefits, however. The professional challenges perceived by teachers can be grouped into six main categories: human resources; physical resources; community issues; professional isolation; and conflict with colleagues.

Issues relating to human resources were the most noted challenges, with six of the teachers interviewed describing work overload and stress associated with being expected to carry out a variety of non-teaching tasks, from cooking and serving breakfast and lunch for the students, doing cleaning, 'too much paperwork', gardening and office work. Some found it difficult to live and work closely with the same people as it felt as if they were 'living on top of each other'.

Some teachers mentioned physical resources as problematic in that it took a long drive to the nearest large town to pick up resources, and two others mentioned that ICT resources and connectivity to the Internet were problematic.

Seven of the teachers found cultural and language issues in the classroom to be professionally challenging because they had not received professional development in teaching children for whom English is a Second Language (ESL) and their cultural awareness PD had not adequately equipped them to deal with children swearing, hygiene issues such as children not being in the habit of blowing noses, and knowing how to deal with children's health issues such as hearing problems caused by otitis media. As discussed above, other research (for example, Herrington & Herrington, 2002; Pegg, 2007), has previously commented on professional development availability as a concern for teachers in non-metropolitan locations.

For six of the teachers, professional isolation, also identified by Starr and White (2008), was mentioned as a challenge. Limited opportunities to 'network' and discuss issues with other teachers seemed to be an issue, as was access to professional knowledge and advice when needed. Four of the teachers reported that conflict with the principal had presented difficulties; some felt 'too closely monitored' and others thought that insufficient support and whole school planning had been offered by the principal. Other teachers noted that working with AEWs was professionally challenging, due to lack of training on the part of the AEW as well as their own limited training in collaborating with AEWs.

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that the interviewees were attracted to remote schools because they wanted 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 in remote schools. 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. The following examples illustrate such paradoxes.

- The standard of accommodation was identified as both a positive and negative aspect of living in remote locations.

- Lifestyle was discussed as an attractive feature, particularly the natural environment, but that same environment could also be seen as hostile and other aspects of the

lifestyle such as 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 could be daunting.

- Similarly, the quality of the professional development provided was praised, but areas requiring more information were identified, and professional isolation was a concern.

These paradoxes illustrate the complexity of the issue of attracting and retaining teachers in remote locations. The expression 'one man's meat is another man's poison' comes to mind and it is clear that there is no single or straightforward solution, however, we believe that the recommendations below may go some way towards alleviating the problem.

Recommendations

Overall, the results of this investigation have uncovered some rich data from which a series of recommendations have been derived. First, professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers should be extended to include cultural awareness, contextual influences (for example, safe driving on unsealed roads and first aid) curriculum familiarisation, pedagogical strategies and teaching English as a Second Language. These areas were identified by many interviewees as fairly basic or even completely lacking in some cases. Thought might also be given to the *timing* of such PD, with the possibility that intensive familiarisation with the above areas might be extremely beneficial prior to actually commencing work on site, and then being offered at regular intervals during tenure.

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

Finally, although the greatest "push-factor" identified by the interviewees related to high cost of living issues, with 74% commenting unfavourably on this aspect, there is clearly no easy answer to this problem. Logically, the more remote and isolated a location, the higher the cost of essentials. However, if teachers are finding this to be a real problem, the very real likelihood exists that staff turnover in these communities will remain high. Consideration to forward planning of bulk purchases and storage of essential goods, and/or possible

subsidisation packages—especially by multi-school or larger communities might go some considerable way to helping retain valuable professionals.

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