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Supporting beginning rural teachers: Lessons from successful schools

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Abstract

Across Australia and internationally, the vexed problem of staffing rural school remains a major issue affecting the educational outcomes of many rural students and their families. TERRAnova, (New Ground' in Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia), is the name of a large Australian Research Council funded (2008-2010) project involving: a national study of pre-service preparation and rural incentive schemes offered by both University and State government agencies, a longitudinal study of beginning teachers who take up rural appointments and a study of communities where teacher retention is high. In 2008 calls for nominations for rural schools with high rates of retaining beginning teachers were sought (over three years), and twenty-four of nearly fifty nominated schools were selected as case studies. Each case study has involved researchers from the TERRAnova team travelling and staying as close to the community nominated as possible. Numerous teaching staff, parents and community members were invited to be interviewed and their recordings were transcribed. Five of these case studies have now been completed, and this paper examines common themes derived from the strategies that support beginning teachers in these rural communities. Key factors emerging to date from the data relate to particular models of rural school leadership, ongoing teacher learning and mentoring, and school support and innovative community practices.

The issue of staffing rural schools

Many rural schools across Australia face regular and sustained staff turnover. Studies indicate that this challenge of staffing rural schools has existed and persisted over a considerable period of time (Roberts 2004, Halsey, 2005). The reasons that this staffing churn exists are varied, with

one particular study (Sharplin, 2002) into pre-service teacher's perceptions of rural life revealing vague expectations of what teaching and living in a rural community would involve, much of which had been drawn from films or word of mouth from friends and colleagues. In this study, Sharplin (2002) found that student teachers' views were usually polarised, either painting pictures of rural life as 'heaven' or 'hell'. For those who saw it as 'heaven', romantic ideals prevailed of rural communities with images of quaint houses nestled in green rolling hills. Others held images of bleak social landscapes with drought ravaged farms and disintegrating rural communities (Sharplin, 2002, p.8). Both views offered unrealistic images of what rural communities were like and neither were productive in preparing student teachers for rural careers. Other studies (Collins, 1999; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; McClure, Redfield & Hammer, 2003) indicate reasons for rural staffing shortages due to teachers' beliefs about geographical, social, cultural, and professional isolation; inadequate housing; and a lack of preparation for multi-age classrooms, which may be reasons for losing rural teachers. Classroom burnout also appears to trigger an exodus from rural classrooms. According to *The Age* (26 February, 2007 as cited in Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 67) "Younger teachers point to issues such as overwork, pay structures, being put on contract without assurance of permanency, community expectations, student management and lack of social status" as reasons for leaving rural areas.

Furthermore, research undertaken by Starr and White (2008) indicates that although teachers and leading teachers, in particular, in rural schools and communities face many of the same issues as their metropolitan counterparts, they also deal with real *and* imagined perceptions of personal and professional isolation and questions about access to professional learning and teaching resources. Teaching and living in rural communities might result in perceived increased levels of visibility in the community, requirements to teach 'out of area', and professional advancement to positions of leadership at an earlier stage in their careers, resulting in considerable personal and professional demands on them as teachers for which they are not always prepared. The role of the beginning teacher may also be influenced by issues beyond their school, particularly if the rural community in which they live is struggling to adapt to economic, political, environmental, social and cultural changes.

While we are beginning to uncover reasons for a rural teacher shortage, there are few studies into addressing this shortage. There is some evidence of rural schools and communities that 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); however, research tends to be limited, and moreover often sporadic and anecdotal. To date, there has been no systematic, national research on the actual success of various incentives designed to attract rural teachers, or much research into those school communities where teacher retention is high. The findings of this project builds on the previous scholarship and research of those in the collaborative research team, and on other recent, related studies in this area, including: the Rural [Teacher] Education Project (R[T]EP), funded as an ARC Linkage project, involving the NSWDET, Charles Sturt University and the University of New England from 2002-2005; research into the rural practicum conducted by the Rural Education Forum of Australia [REFA] (Halsey, 2005); the National Survey of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006); and the Rural Education Forum of Australia's 'Pre-Service Country Teaching Costings Survey' (Halsey, 2006).

Some research, such as that conducted by Collins (1999), highlights that a possible answer to the rural shortage is a 'grow your own' approach and that a focus should lie in the ability of those in charge to target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas. While we acknowledge that there are some pre-service student teachers, in particular Indigenous teachers (Reid & Santoro, 2006), who begin their pre-service teacher education committed to returning to their home towns and communities, and who may already have knowledge, abilities and a bodily *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1987) that will allow them to feel at home and powerful in their rural or remote settings, our major focus is not with these individuals. Our concern is the education of pre-service teachers who do not necessarily have this pre-conceived commitment to rural teaching or the knowledge of living and teaching in rural and regional locations. Also we believe that the shortage of rural teachers in schools must not be the sole responsibility of rural communities or rural and regional universities alone, rather this is an issue that requires a targeted and synchronised approach by *all* education providers and education stakeholders to take responsibility for rural students. As outlined in Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock and Hastings (2008) our stance

as a research group is that while we work with the pragmatic assumption that many of our graduates will decide to teach in country schools *because* they are country people, and know that the myths and rumours are not the whole story, we also know that this is insufficient and inadequate as a means of ensuring teacher supply and commitment to rural schools

Methodology and method

The project is working with a model of Rural Social Space (Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock and Hastings, 2008) which foregrounds issues of geography, economy and demography in understanding the particularities of place - and the differences in social space that are produced in their interrelationship. As issues of social practice outside of the school setting appear to impact on the desire of teachers (and other traditionally itinerant professionals in rural communities, such as police and health practitioners) to stay longer in a particular location (Sharplin 2002), we have attempted to highlight elements related to these in our initial analysis of the case study materials and interview transcripts. At the same time, however, it is clear that the work place, and the nature of relationships inside the rural school, is highly significant as a factor in supporting rural teachers in their career and professional development.

In 2008 calls for nominations for rural schools with high rates of retaining beginning teachers were sought (over three years), and twenty-four of nearly fifty nominated schools were selected as case studies from across Australia. The selection of the case studies was based on those school communities that were pre-dominantly in-land and also reflected the diversity of rural spaces across Australia. For example the four case studies in Western Australia which have been selected are from the far North to the very South and across the State. The five case studies discussed in this paper range from Queensland, Western Australia, Victoria and South Australia. Each case study involved researchers from the TERRAnova team travelling to the nominated community for a period of up to three days, to enable a good cross section of school and community interviews to take place. Using photographic, print and other media documentation of each site, as well as the corpus of interview transcripts from Principals, established teachers, beginning teachers, parents and community members in each setting, we have produced the summary chart in the next section. This chart represents information that will be used to develop the first five case studies, and serves as an interim representation

of both the elements of Rural Social Space (Reid et al, 2008), and the approaches that we have discerned within the schools and communities in each site that appear to be influential in retaining teachers in the school and town.

Interim findings

Each of the case study sites in the chart below has been given a pseudonym that we feel reflects a sense of the community as rural social space.

Table 1: Case studies of school communities with high retention of beginning teachers

| Case study | Economy, industry, | Place, land, environment, sustainability, | People, culture, indigeneity | Nurturing approaches to Newly Qualified Teachers |
|--|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| 1 Apple-V Student population: 40 | Dairy, cattle, viticulture . | Volcanic plains, inland lake. | Farming community with new members coming into the area to trial new ventures No significant indigenous community. | Valued expertise of each other. NQT Positioned as an expert. Supportive and respectful leadership. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| 2 Forest - WA Student population: 800 | Traditionally timber, potatoes, stone fruit agriculture, now wineries, truffles, tree plantations tourism, agriculture, | Environment, plentiful water, mists, high quality soil. Benign climate, off main highway, sporting facilities, spacious school grounds. | Respected, 2500 population, staff members have close connections to the geographic area, high level of staff participation in the community. | Encouraging initiative and will support with resources, calm yet purposeful atmosphere in the school. |
| 3 Lakeside-Q Student population: 110 | Beef cattle, (previously some sheep), camels, goats, cotton, rural properties, fossils, dinosaur trails. | Isolated, vast flat landscapes, dry but with bore water, man-made lake for recreation, floods and droughts not uncommon. | Indigenous children and families are part of the life of the small town. | Very supportive, informal mentoring, caring staff, respectful of each other, teacher aides worked equitably with the staff. |
| 4 Wheat - SA Student population 350 | Predominantly wheat farming with increasing light industry. | Isolated, rolling hills, currently in drought. | No significant indigenous community. | We don't 'hand hold' the teachers. It is their responsibility to make connections with community. No specific mentoring in the school. |
| 5 River - SA Student population | Previously orchards and vineyards now anything that works: e.g. cactus farming | Severely impacted by drought, previously pretty lake now 'dying'. | Indigenous children and families are part of the school community. | School community were very supportive of new staff and the parents always conduct a welcoming barbecue. |

Analysis

Overall, three dominant themes relating to the success of retaining beginning teachers have emerged from the data, collected from the first six case studies: (1) a particular model of rural school leadership, (2) an opportunity for ongoing teacher learning and mentoring and (3) the community's ability to respond to change and initiate and develop innovative community practices. These three themes while not necessarily unique only to rural schools, do speak strongly to a particular type of successful retention model for rural schools that involves a combination of all three factors. The importance of what the case studies highlight is the threads that bind these factors together. In particular, the types of collaborative and supportive relationships built between beginning teachers, the staff and community members and the opportunities for beginning teachers to be both nurtured within the community and have a sense of their agency and opportunity to participate in the re-shaping of their community, seem at this stage key to a successful model.

Leadership

In the majority of the case studies, beginning teachers described a particular model of leadership that enabled them to feel that they both belonged and contributed meaningfully to the life of the students, school and community. The leadership model described by the beginning teachers reflected a type of principal and leadership group who adopted a distributed view of leadership and positioned the beginning teacher so that they were able to actively contribute their knowledge and expertise in the school. The beginning teachers in the case studies were, thus, not treated as novices, nor were they viewed from a deficit perspective in that their skills and knowledge were highly valued and utilised by the staff and across the school. In this way, the beginning teachers, whilst still being supported by the teachers through an informal mentorship program (as described below), were also able to act as experts in some areas. This was particularly evident in the case of Apple, where the beginning teacher came from a culturally different background to the majority of the staff and local traditional dairy farm families and students. Tao was

able, as he described, to contribute meaningfully to the school community because his knowledge of Eastern traditional beliefs about health, exercise and teaching methods were valued and utilised. This belief in him by the principal and teaching staff, contributed greatly to him settling into the school and the community and was the reason for why he stayed, even though at first he found it difficult to be away from the friendship and cultural base he had built while studying in the city.

An illustrative example of the values placed on the skills and knowledge Tao brought with him is demonstrated by his ability to introduce Table Tennis into the school's sporting curriculum, in a community where previously only traditional gender based sports such as football for boys and netball for girls were practised. Although this might appear a small change, it provides a contrasting view to beginning teachers who describe themselves as having to 'fit into the community or else', which often results in many beginning teachers choosing not staying in a place where they have to compromise their own beliefs or simply do not wish to play football or go to the pub regularly for example.

Like it's been raining for a while in Apple, and I said to him 'the kids will be stuck inside the classroom playing on the computers, why don't we get some table tennis tables and put them in the multi-purpose room and we can play and he said okay and we got them within a week, and now I'm teaching the kids how to play table tennis and they're all experts now.' (Beginning Teacher, Apple)

In Tao's reflection on the qualities of the Principal he remarked.

Yes, he supports me ... just like little things, he'll come straight away to get things for you, and you don't see that 'he's the principal, he's the boss', he's very easy going and I think that anyone who comes to work here would feel comfortable, you don't feel that, like sometimes with some principals, you feel like they're up high and you're looking up at them like this (gestures as though looking down)... but he doesn't have that sort of attitude. (Beginning Teacher, Apple)

In the case of Forest, 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 Karla (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 Karla'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. (Teacher, Forest)

In Wheat, the majority of the staff had been in the school for many years. The principal made a concerted attempt to keep the executive refreshed and provided opportunities for staff professional learning and capacity building. He had totally renewed the senior staff in the seven years that he had been in the school – a process that enabled talented younger staff leadership opportunities.

Community Connections

Like I said, well even before I arrived here Karla and some other people sent out an information package, which wasn't just about life at the school, also community information about Forest itself. (Beginning teacher, Forest).

This simple gesture of sending information to a new graduate about the community and the opportunities the community provides for the beginning teacher reflects a belief that it is important to welcome beginning teachers into the community as well as the school. This approach appears something that all the successful case studies tended to recognise and value and highlights the importance of the rural community in the work of a rural teacher.

When teachers come into the school they are very welcome to Forest... that parents that have got students that come to the school get involved with the teachers make them very welcome, and help them out in any way to make them settle into the area and into

the town itself and just give them a directional map to show them what is around to get the out there to enjoy what is in Forest, and yeah, we all need as much help as we can. (Community member, Forest)

In one of the case studies (Wheat) the community had ensured new housing accommodation had been built for new staff. The new housing allowed for both privacy and a sense of community by constructing a set of townhouses. This community initiative reflects the understanding of the importance of providing safe and secure housing at an affordable price, for beginning teachers.

It has been argued that rural schools, in particular, are well placed to play a crucial role in building community capacities. As Halsey (2006) states, many rural communities' schools 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. The case studies indicated that all the school communities were trying to be such a rallying agency. In Forest, the re-imagining of the community came in the shape of one particular industry being closed down and the community actively seeking other possibilities. "The town really had to re-invent itself from about 8 years ago when the government stopped the forestry." 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 changed, we 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, these sorts of vineyards and they have been very successful with these vineyards and it is nice, very unique. You have 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. When the industry closed down it was sort of oh geeze 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, Forest)

In Wheat, this agency took the shape of a cluster of schools combining together to form one school to enable all children across the schools to come together for social events and to strengthen the academic subject choice available. The amalgamation of the schools was community driven.

There was a council established and the council was two groups from each school plus principals, and the Department didn't know what to do with us. They've never had a cross schools one. It was originally 5 schools and we fought very hard at that stage for our kid's rights to do things. I mean drought has made the need more essential because kids can't go away somewhere to get access to some subjects for their careers and it's worked. We worked really hard in those early days a lot of it was community driven. The amalgamation of schools was community driven. (Teacher, Wheat)

At Lakeside the community agency and opportunity to ensure beginning teachers were welcomed, took the shape of a number of get-together experiences, including a "Meet and Greet" and a breakfast where the parents can get to meet the new teachers.

Yes, sometimes it's breakfast, sometimes it's a barbecue tea, it's somewhere that the community is invited to come out and meet the teachers. They also welcomed the new teachers and show them around, usually Kaye will organize someone that's in town to meet the new teacher and show them where they are living and take them around and introduce them. Like you walk into a shop and it will be "are you the new teacher?" (Teacher, Lakeside)

On-going Teacher Support

So keeping them [teachers] here, one of the major ones is working together as a whole staff. Currently our staff morale on school opinion surveys is 100%, so 100% of staff are either satisfied or very satisfied with staff morale; so keeping that up helps people want to come to work and want to be here. (Principal, Lakeside)

Alongside the principal and community support, emerged a particular teacher support that allowed for an open environment for beginning teachers to ask questions, trial new ideas, seek advice and give their own to others. None of the case-studies had a formal mentor program, although they all alluded to the compliance aspect of some State-based mentoring agreements. In the majority of the case-studies, the teachers and beginning teachers spoke of a rather informal mentoring relationship, based on strong, but respectful relationships with beginning teachers and the recognition of the need for them to be included in school and community life, as well as have their privacy respected:

Outside of that, just in general there is that support between staff, and that if you ask a question, they give an answer and they're more than happy to share advice on whatever they've done in their teaching, so whether it's material or actually just their method on how to deal with something in the classroom situation. So you would say the teachers are quite positive in that....that sharing and support. So that would be an element and I guess the other point that has been said is, everyone can kind of make mistakes, but the important thing is that you give it a go and if you need help you ask for it. (Teacher, Lakeside)

And look the teachers are just so good to get along with, they are good, they get there and they listen into the problems that arise, they work with the students and are eager to put anything into place to achieve the goals that they want to achieve out of the students and the teachers simply enjoy that they seem to, you know some of the students give them a bit of a challenge to work on. The teachers enjoy that and it seems to be such a good community of the working relationship between the students and the teachers and where we are situated. (Community member, Forest)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the case-studies available to date indicate three major themes that seem to be important in retaining beginning teachers. Firstly the presence of a senior leadership team, especially a supportive principal, that values what the beginning teacher brings to the school and the community, rather than prescribing what the beginning teacher should do. Allowing the beginning teacher to trial and error and to ask questions in a safe and supportive environment is also a key point. Allowing the beginning teacher to make their own connections and have an active role

in the community appears important and simple strategies such as a community walk, a ‘meet-and-greet’, providing information about the community’s resources and community involvement all appear successful. It is important to note that, in all the case-studies, members of the school community itself took some initiative to promote themselves, to highlight their own resources or actively create the opportunities that would encourage new teachers to want to stay because the resources were there, or because new staff members could immerse themselves in the community renewal process: it was something that they had a stake in.. Finally, mentoring appeared to be another necessary part of the overall staff retention strategy, although it appeared less formal, with beginning teachers being given the opportunities to establish their own working and professional relationships, and knowing that they could have someone to go to seemed to work the best. It was interesting, too, to note that, as one of the teachers from Forest stated, “I think that the success attracts interest and attracts people”. This sentiment speaks to the opportunity that rural schools and their communities have to be active in shaping their own futures and for the need for rural schools to have agency in promoting themselves to attract and retain beginning teachers.

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