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Abstract: In recent years the notion of a 'sea change' has become popularised through a number of television programs such as 'Sea change' and the 'Real Sea Change'. Typically, this life changing event is associated with a move from an urban centre to a coastal place usually as the person approaches retirement. In this study, an exploration of the reasons why some teachers opt for a life changing move to a rural place - not the coastal place - are examined. This rural change is called a tree change. The biographies and demographics of these tree changing teachers are explored. Additionally, the study sought information on the adjustment and settling in processes for these tree changing teachers as they moved into both their new rural school and the community in which they lived. Implications for rural staffing of schools are drawn from this study.

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Going up country: Tree change teachers

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Abstract

In recent years the notion of a 'sea change' has become popularised through a number of television programs such as 'Sea change' and the "Real Sea Change". Typically, this life changing event is associated with a move from an urban centre to a coastal place usually as the person approaches retirement.

In this study, an exploration of the reasons why some teachers opt for a life changing move to a rural place - not the coastal place - are examined. This rural change is called a tree change. The biographies and demographics of these tree changing teachers are explored. Additionally, the study sought information on the adjustment and settling in processes for these tree changing teachers as they moved into both their new rural school and the community in which they lived.

Implications for rural staffing of schools are drawn from this study.

Introduction

A number of recent television series such as *'Sea Change'*, with the lead role of Laura Gibson being taken by Sigrid Thornton, *'Always Greener'*, with social worker John Taylor (John Howard's character), and the reality television series, *'The Real Seachange'*, hosted by John Howard documents the successes and failings of city based people as they move into and live their new lifestyle in coastal, or rural or foreign landscapes.

What is a sea change?

The term 'sea change' became popular in the late 1990's when it was applied to people wishing to leave their current lifestyle and embark on a new life path. Burnley and Murphy (2004) argue that a person undergoing a sea change or 'sea changer' is 'someone who more or less makes a free choice

to leave the metropolis' (p. 34). The sea change phenomenon has become popular amongst the baby boomers (44 – 59 year olds) (Burnley and Murphy, 2004).

What is a tree change?

In some contexts, the terms sea change and tree change are interchangeable and both terms are taken to mean a lifestyle change. In this study, we have separated 'tree change' from 'sea change'. A tree change has a restricted place related connotation that specifically excludes those seaside coastal locations linked to a sea change.

In this study, our primary purpose is to explore the reasons why teachers, as a specific group, opt for a lifestyle change to the rural (and non seaside coastal) regions within New South Wales. This group we are labelling as 'tree changers'.

In essence, this study is about teachers who seek a lifestyle relocation to a rural place within New South Wales. For tree change teachers, this relocation means a significant life event involving re-establishment in a totally new place, i.e. the tree change experience. In the context of this study, relocation is taken to mean the establishment of a permanent residence in a completely new rural area.

Research Question

The key research questions explored in this study were:

- 1) What are the contributing factors for experienced urban based teachers seeking to relocate to a rural teaching appointment?
- 2) For the urban based, experienced teacher relocating to a rural school and hence a new community, how is the acclimatisation process facilitated? What factors make it successful?

Literature review

The terms sea change and tree change have only been coined in the past six years or so. However, the phenomenon has been described previously by demographers in particular as a rural rebound (e.g. Johnson and Beale, 1998), a turnaround, a counterurbanisation, a deconcentration and/or a trend reversal (Hugo, 1996).

In the American context both Rudzitis (1999) and Johnson and Beale (1998) report on the rise of urban to rural migration as a demographic phenomenon in which the rural area experiences

population growth. These authors examined why people choose to relocate to a rural region of the USA and cite reasons for this tree change that included: i) social and environmental conditions such as low crime rate; the importance of the scenery, environmental quality, pace of life; and, ii) outdoor recreational opportunities as significant influencing factors.

Newton and Bell (1996) have stated that Australians are among the most mobile people in the world. They reported that, on average, Australians change their residential address 11 times over their lifespan. The Australian social demographers, Burnley and Murphy (2004) have examined the sea change phenomenon for rural and regional Australia. In their analysis of the demographic changes occurring within New South Wales, they found that most people were relocating from Sydney to:

- 1) coastal regions to the North or South of Sydney;
- 2) regional cities (such as Orange, Wagga Wagga, and Dubbo); and,
- 3) rural places (such as the Mudgee region and the Snowy River region).

Burnley and Murphy (2004) found that the majority of sea changers were of working age (70%) with the balance being retirees (30%). These Australian researchers noted Australia has experienced this population mobility or sea change phenomenon since the 1970's. These authors sought to understand the principle reason(s) why people choose to relocate to these non metropolitan places of New South Wales. They identified lifestyle reasons (e.g. better place to raise a family, live in a quieter place, less crime) as important determinants as well as the employment based reasons and retirement reasons.

The research literature discussed above has tended to focus on general attributes of sea change populations. In contrast, this study has a specific group – teachers as its focus and seeks to explore their reasons for opting for a tree change. Focusing on teachers and teaching in rural places, there is a significant body of Australian literature addressing issues such as: i) teacher pre-service programs (e.g. Boylan, 2005); ii) staff recruitment and retention, (e.g. HREOC, 2000; and Roberts, 2005); and, iii) incentive programs for rural appointments (e.g. Scott, 1990). One of the interesting observations that can be made about much of this literature is the assertion that the recruitment of teachers to rural and remote places has been a long and continuing problem for state education authorities (e.g. Scott, 1990; HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005).

Some of the key issues raised in the literature on rural teacher appointment and retention indicates:

- Rural living implies that everyone knows everyone else and new teachers would be expected to become part of the community. There exists a close interrelationship between the school and the teachers in the community. (CSC, 1988; Roberts, 2005);
- The experience of teaching in a rural school can be extremely rewarding due to the sense of community that can be gained from belonging to a close knit community and it is an advantage to work with students closely and to know most of the students personally. (CSC, 1988; Meyenn, et al., 1991; Preston, 2000; Boylan, et al, 2003; and Roberts, 2005);
- The provision of recruitment and retention incentives is suggested as one strategy to attract teachers to rural places as well as being effective in retaining teachers, especially experienced teachers. These experienced teachers can provide leadership role models for beginning teachers or teachers newly appointed to a rural school. (HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005);
- Rural teaching can be a positive social and personal experience in which the teacher experiences other cultures and other world views, sees life from a new perspective as exciting and challenging to be a participant in a new culture, enjoys the environmental conditions and open spaces in a rural location. However, rural teaching does have its disadvantages which are often linked to personal anxiety, isolation and alienation. (Boylan and McSwan 1998, HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005);
- Professional development access and participation is a crucial issue from rural teachers. (HREOC, 2000; MCEETYA, 2001; Williams, 2002; and Vinson, 2003); and,
- Geographical location, more opportunity for involvement with students, a sense of belonging in the community, a rural lifestyle, lower crime rates, less traffic, good accommodation, curriculum development opportunities, recreational opportunities have all been cited by Boylan, et al. (1993) as reasons for teacher retention in a rural environment.

Whereas there is a significant literature focusing on these rural teacher issues, the recency of the sea change/tree change phenomenon means that there has been very little research on this phenomenon and why these teachers choose to participate in a tree change event. It is hypothesised that one potentially advantageous outcome for rural schools from the tree change phenomenon is that the urban teachers are likely remain in these rural areas and provide the continuity and staffing stability that is often lacking in many rural schools, (HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005).

Methodology

The study focussed on the experiences of teachers who have moved from urban schools to rural schools and stayed teaching in those rural areas. The primary form of data collection was a self reporting questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to gain information on: 1) general teaching experience; 2) teaching expertise; 3) biographical information; 4) the decision process to relocate; 5) professional development; 6) life in a rural school/community; 7) reasons for relocating; and, 8) adjustment to rural living. Teachers needed to meet the following two critical selection criteria to be included :

- 1) they had taught at their current rural school for at least 4 years; and,
- 2) had relocated from an urban place in New South Wales to their current rural school.

From the 1340 schools located in rural New South Wales, a sample of 121 schools were approached and invited to participate in the study.

Only 40 schools responded to the questionnaire. 35 participants completed the questionnaire. However, 11 respondents were ruled ineligible as the respondent did not meet the selection. Thus, the sample size was 24 tree change teachers. This gave a 19.8% response rate.

Results

Biographical data

As part of the questionnaire, the 24 participating teachers provided biographical information. 14 teachers were female (58.3%) and 9 were male with one no response. 17 teachers were in a permanent partnership relationship while the remainder reported that they were single, divorced or separated. The majority of the tree changing teachers were over 50 years of age (N=15) with another 5 teachers being between 40 and 49 years of age. Nineteen (19) of the twenty-four teachers (79.2%) had children.

Teaching background

Three quarters of the teachers (N=18, 75%) were employed in government schools with the balance (N=6, 25%) being employed in non-government schools. 44.1% of the teachers were employed in secondary schools and 55.9% were employed in primary schools. The range of total years of teaching experience was 4 - 37 years with the mean number of years of teaching being 25.27 years. All teachers had taught in urban schools prior to their tree change with the range being 4 – 26 years and the mean being 12.23 years.

At the time of the study all 24 teachers were located in rural places with the 18 ex-metropolitan teachers now being located in either rural hinterland areas behind the seaside coastal locations along the northern or southern fringe outside of Newcastle, Sydney and Wollongong (N=8) or in inland rural places (N=10). For six teachers they had undertaken a two step process which involved an initial rural appointment, then a move to a metropolitan location prior to their current (and final) tree change appointment. Four of these teachers had been appointed to a rural hinterland place while the remaining two teachers had sought an inland rural appointment.

Deciding on the tree change

The first research questions focussed on:

- What are the contributing factors for experienced urban based teachers seeking to relocate to a rural teaching appointment?

This question was divided into three areas: 1) the decision to relocate; 2) teaching issues; and 3) professional development opportunities.

Participants were asked about their decision making processes that led to their tree change. One question asked: *How long from the time the decision was made to leave the urban lifestyle until you moved to a rural area?* For 21 teachers (87.5%) the length of time to consider the likelihood of a tree change was less than one year while the remaining 3 teachers (12.5%) took more than two years prior to their relocation. A subsequent open ended question asked the participants to explain why they had chosen a rural place. A total of 45 responses were provided by the 24 teachers which are shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1 Reasons for the tree change

Type of Reason	Frequency	
	N	Percent
Quality of lifestyle	16	35.56
Career path/promotion	8	17.78
Children	7	15.56
“Returning” home	5	11.11
Family	3	6.67
Escape competitiveness	3	6.67
Self sufficiency	1	2.22
Land	1	2.22
Death in family	1	2.22
	45	100.1

The major reason reported by 16 teachers (66.7%) who relocated was for the peace and tranquility of a rural area due to the promise of a better lifestyle. 8 teachers (33.3%) made the choice to relocate due to career moves such as gaining a promotional position. Examples of comments provided by the teachers included:

“It was an area where we had gone for holidays for a number of years and wasn’t too far from Sydney.” and “I had worked as a community artist in a rural setting and enjoyed the community spirit, the pace i.e. I had done the city thing and tired of the competitiveness; crowded environment; and looked for a more natural lifestyle surrounded by space.”

Another question in this sub section sought information on whether the participants had researched the rural area they chose for their tree change. Of the 24 respondents, 15 teachers (62.5%) had done some research while surprisingly 7 teachers (29.2%) had not done any research and 2 chose not to complete this question.

Teaching matters

A series of questions was included in the questionnaire that sought information from the teachers about their perceptions of teaching resource availability in their tree change location. 23 teachers responded to this question. Their responses are shown the Table 2 below.

Table 2: Availability of resources

Availability of Resources	Good Availability		Limited Availability		Not at all	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
a) range of books	14	60.8	9	39.1	0	0
b) library	15	65.2	7	34.7	0	0
c) bookstore	6	26.0	10	43.4	7	30.4
d) videos	9	39.1	12	52.2	2	8.7
e) Internet access	15	65.2	6	26.0	2	8.7

60.8% of research participants found that they have a good range of books readily available to assist them with their teaching, 65.2% of the teachers stated that they have good library resources, 26.0% have good access to bookstores while 30.4% stated they had no access to bookstores, 39.1% reported that they have good video availability, and two in three teachers (65.2%) reported good Internet access in their rural place.

The second area explored focussed on availability and accessibility to relevant professional development for the teachers. 23 teachers chose to respond to this question and their responses are reported below.

Table 3: Professional development

Professional Development	Easy		Satisfactory		Some Difficulties		Not at all	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
a) available	12	52.2	3	13.0	7	30.4	1	4.3
b) accessible	9	39.1	6	26.1	8	34.8	0	0
c) consultancy support	14	60.9	5	21.7	4	17.4	0	0

About half of the teachers (52.2%) indicated that professional development was easily available in their rural place. About two in five teachers (39.1%) stated that professional development was easily accessible in the place to which they had relocated and consultancy support was readily available (60.9%).

Adjustment to rural area

The second research questions addressed this issue:

- For the urban based, experienced teacher relocating to a rural school and hence a new community, how is the acclimatisation process facilitated? What factors make it successful?

Two questions were included in the questionnaire that probed the levels of adjustment to a rural area and the degree of acceptance of the teacher by colleagues and by the community. A five point rating scale was used for each question where 1 = Very easily and 5 = Very difficult. The teachers' responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Settling into new surroundings

Degree of adjustment to new rural place	Very easily		Easily		Satisfactory		Difficult		Very difficult	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Settling into new place	10	43.5	7	30.4	3	13.0	2	8.7	1	4.3
Degree of Acceptance										
a) by colleagues	14	60.9	7	30.4	0	0	2	8.7	0	0
b) by the community	10	43.5	9	39.1	3	13.0	1	4.3	0	0

When the 'very easily' and 'easily' responses were combined for both questions, almost three quarters (73.9%) of the teachers reported that they had settled into their new surroundings with no difficulty. Similarly almost all teachers (91.3%) reported that they were well accepted by their colleagues and 4 out of 5 teachers (82.6%) believed that they were well accepted by their local community.

Life in a rural area

The tree changing teachers were asked to identify the positives about living in a rural school or rural community. 22 of 24 participants took the opportunity to respond to the first question about their rural school (Table 5) and produced a total of 51 responses. 21 of the 24 teachers provided 53 responses describing the advantages of their rural community (Table 6).

Table 5: Positives of a rural school

Category of response	Frequency of responses		Examples of responses
	Number	Percent (%)	
Students	20	39.2	Less worldly; Less self interested; Less influenced by peers; Behaviour management easier

Teaching	13	25.5	Teaching easier; Teaching not as competitive; Young staff combined with experienced teachers; Inexperienced teachers get the chance to offer ideas and run with them; Greater chance for promotion
Community	11	21.6	All embracing. Very social, very supportive. Friendly
Atmosphere	4	7.8	
Fresh air/space	2	3.9	
Generations of contact	1	2.0	
Total	51	100	

The most frequently mentioned positive advantage of teaching in their rural school was students (N = 20, 39.2%). This finding is consistent with research on rural teacher retention by Boylan and McSwan (1997) in which they reported that long staying rural teachers found the personalised interaction with their students to be the most significant and implicit motivator to remain in their rural school.

Table 6: Positives of a rural community

Category of response	Frequency of response		Examples of responses
	Number	Percent (%)	
Quality of lifestyle	29	54.7	Friendly, relaxed No traffic problems
People	13	24.5	Genuinely helpful
Environment	8	15.1	Safer, calmer
Time for you	2	3.8	
Recognition	1	1.9	Greater opportunities for family to participate in and contribute to community (and to be recognised)

			accordingly)
Total	53	100.0	

The perceived quality of their lifestyle in the teacher's chosen rural place and the interactions with other residents of their rural location were important advantages of their rural communities. To balance the preceding two questions, teachers were also asked to identify any negatives about working in a rural school or living in a rural community. 22 of the 24 teachers provided 42 responses to disadvantages of the rural school (Table 7) and 21 of the 24 teachers provided 43 responses to the disadvantages of the rural community (Table 8).

Table 7: Negatives of a rural school

Category of response	Frequency of responses		Examples of responses
	Number	Percent (%)	
Professional	19	45.2	Every staff member has to take on multiple roles – overloading; Lack of support for senior students e.g. HSC study courses
Geographical	12	30.9	
None	5	9.5	None that you wouldn't find in any school, other than distances to travel, excursions
Personal	3	7.1	You can't 'hide' – if you have a problem or an 'off' day everyone knows about it
Social	3	7.1	
Total	42	99.8	

The major disadvantage associated with their employment at the rural school focussed on matters relating to school organisational and administrative issues and the feeling of being overworked.

Table 8: Negatives of a rural community

Category of response	Frequency of responses	Examples of responses
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	Number	Percent (%)	
Community	19	44.2	Under the microscope, not trusted for a <u>long</u> time
Geographical	8	18.6	Distances to medical; cultural opportunities. Costs of travel; fuel
Lack of privacy	7	16.3	Gold fish bowl syndrome – high visibility
Isolation	4	9.3	Distances to family. Some sense of isolation. Lack of services in remote rural areas
Professional	3	6.9	Distances to PD
None	2	4.7	
Total	43	99.9	

Community interaction and acceptance issues emerged as the significant negative for these tree change teachers.

Summation

The key findings from the research are listed below:

1. The majority of respondents were female (58.3%) government employees (72%) teaching in a Secondary high school, over the age of 50 (58.3%), who are married (70.8%) and have 2 children on average with an average teaching experience of 25.27 years.
2. Just over three quarters (79.2%) of the respondents had no rural teaching experience before embarking on their tree change.
3. About one third (35.56%) chose a rural area for the quality of lifestyle (peace and tranquility) and 17.78% chose a rural area for career path/promotional reasons.
4. With regard to adjusting to their new surroundings, three quarters adjusted easily. It was almost unanimous that the respondents were easily accepted by their peers and the community.

5. Life in a rural school had many positives, the most important being the students who were regarded as being easier to teach. The most valued aspects of living in a rural community were the quality of lifestyle, and the generosity of the people from the community.
6. But with positives, often come negatives. Some of the negatives cited about teaching in rural schools were professional overload as well as “life in a fishbowl”. The geographical distance from amenities was quoted as a negative for living in both rural schools and rural communities.

The literature suggests that teaching resources are said to be difficult to acquire. The findings of this study were that almost two thirds of the respondents had a good range of books, library, Internet access and consultancy support available, whereas half the respondents said that there was not a good bookstore or videos available to them. Similarly, the literature suggested that professional development is difficult to access, although the results contradict this fact with just over half declaring that professional development is easily available, just over a third being in two minds as to whether professional development is easily accessible or they had difficulties with accessibility and more than two thirds of the respondents admitting that professional development activities were well promoted.

Conclusion

For policy makers in education departments realising that about three in four tree change teachers (N=19, 79.2%) did not have any rural teaching experience before they transferred to a rural school presents an opportunity to consider new and innovative strategies to attract and support potential urban based teachers to a rural location. One significant reason for the tree change centred on the perceived improvement in the teachers’ quality of lifestyle. Additionally, policy makers can draw upon the accessibility and availability of professional opportunities reported by these tree change teachers to overcome the often perceived lack of professional support in rural areas as a strategy to recruit more tree change teachers for rural schools.

On the whole the participants were easily accepted by both their peers and the community. The two significant positives of living in a rural area are the quality of lifestyle and the people with whom the participants share their lives. The professionally based positives associated with teaching in a rural school are the students who are predominantly easier to teach with no discipline problems and an eagerness to learn which makes teaching a much more enjoyable and satisfying task.

However, these positives go hand in hand with negatives. Professional overloading is a matter for concern as is the fact that you can’t hide, and accessing support for secondary students were all given equal weighting for negative aspects of teaching in a rural school. Community distrust and narrow-mindedness were cited as negatives associated with living in a rural community as was the geographical distances from services and amenities.

One of the main difficulties with adjusting to rural life is the lack of services. Other differences such as the higher cost of living, feelings of separation from family and friends, travel distances greater although travel times are less, higher petrol prices and cheaper housing are all consistent with the findings from the literature review.

All the participants attended some form of professional development whether it is a weekly faculty or whole school staff meeting. A small percentage attend a monthly professional development activity either with a professional association or within their teaching region.

The community infrastructure is well established. All the participants reported that there were lots of schools both primary and secondary available, be they government, Catholic, Independent or private schools. Sporting facilities of various descriptions were also available although a comment was made that if they wanted to participate in a competitive team, they needed to travel out of their area to compete.

Many outdoor recreational facilities were named. Some mentioned clubs and pubs as their recreational availability. For entertainment, many mentioned that theatre is available whether it is live theatre or movies and some added that RSL clubs often had shows too.

So, the tree changing teacher is one who has spent a long time in the teaching service, has reasonable access to resources and professional development, is easily accepted by fellow teachers and the community and who relocates for the better quality of lifestyle and easier teaching!

However, one of the major messages to emerge from this study was that life is what you make it. If the teacher is prepared to get involved with the local community and the activities that the community can offer, then acceptance will follow and feelings of isolation will be minimised. Most of the responses can be paraphrased as “what you put into life is what you get out of it” and as one direct quote suggested:– “embrace it”!

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