Reawakening education policy and practice in rural Australia

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Abstract
There is nothing static about rural! Rural environments, economies and sociologies continue to change and grow, and leave educators with new, dynamic and exciting challenges. It is argued that these changes and allied decisions about rural education are often made by people who are not immersed in the concerns, nor have they a sense of nuances of living in rural communities.

This paper focuses on ways of reversing our thinking – of seeing the provision of educational opportunities grounded in a rural perspective. It draws upon the literature and current research to suggest that we need a rural lens. Through this rural lens new, different and innovative strategies, policies and ways of thinking about rural schooling, staffing practice and curriculum policy emerge. It offers practical means by which we might return to rural education issues with a rural rather than an outsiders agenda and enhance rural education in the process.

Introduction
Education in rural places across Australia has evolved a range of unusual strategies and practices. These are a reflection of the organisational cultures, the unique rural conditions of geography and climate, and staffing policies within education departments at a moment in time. Unfortunately these policies often reflect a city-based view of the rural landscape.

In New South Wales, responses to the education of rural places have included everything from pedal radio to part-time schools, travelling schools, one teacher schools and a range of central schools (K-10/12) in an attempt to address the challenge of providing a free public education to all, especially in the less populated regions. Alongside physical and human resourcing issues, many education departments have also operated a bonded scholarship program for pre-service teacher training courses, which require that graduates spend a number of years in a rural location – often as a first appointment.

Further, in every state and territory of Australia, there are schools located in places that are classified as difficult-to-staff or hard-to-staff. It is not surprising that these schools are located in communities that are in remote/rural areas. The schools in these areas have been characterised by:

- high teacher turnover;
- few services and facilities;
• inexperienced staff (both teaching staff and executive);
• teachers who have been coerced to go west to these remote places;
• teachers who do their time there and cannot wait to transfer to somewhere else; and,
• teachers who feel personally, socially and professionally isolated.

It would appear that the pervading views of rural teaching has its origins in the work of Turney and other researchers at the University of Sydney, coming from the late 1970’s (Turney, Sinclair and Cairns, 1980). They characterised rural places as ones where the conditions of living were poor, where teacher housing was scarce, ill maintained and of low quality. The conditions of living and teaching in rural places described by Turney et al (1980) have unfortunately pervaded thinking and seem to underlie current policy and practice in rural education in New South Wales.

Why should such views impact so adversely upon rural education? Why do we still live with views of rural staffing and education provision in rural areas which seem so centred in somewhat outdated views of rural schools and communities? This paper argues that we need to adopt a rural view of education, rather than a city-based set of solutions to rural education from a centralised, expedient but often counter-productive policy perspective.

Part of the answer involves a re-examination of our basic assumptions. In more recent times, creative, innovative and different strategies and policies have been implemented internationally to address rural education. These practices embody the application of a new way of thinking which has been identified through a reconceptualisation of education policy, and the application of a rural lens (Corbett and Mulcahy, 2006).

Such a view requires each of us to re-examine our thinking from a rural, rather than from an urban or bureaucratic perspective. It is thus appropriate that our conversation begin by looking briefly at the place we call rural.

The evolving nature of rural communities

There is little doubt that things are changing in rural areas. Life in rural Australia has changed rapidly in recent years, with these changes cutting to the heart of rural socio-economies. At the broadest level, rural communities still rely heavily upon agriculture, but as indicated by Gray and Lawrence (2001: 53) the process of change in rural Australia is, to a substantial degree, propelled by the restructuring of farming. They suggest that the decline in agricultural fortunes is critical to the decline of rural Australian towns and small communities. These views were supported at a more general level by Cocklin and Alston (2003: 2) who speak of a spiral of decline, put under pressure by population losses, government policies, and reduced cash flows, and the loss of services then adds impetus to the process of decline.

At the same time it needs to be stated that the larger regional service centres have in some ways benefited from the problems in the smaller ones. As services are withdrawn from smaller towns, people are forced to travel to the larger centres to satisfy their needs, be they financial, medical, educational or social. This has occurred during a period when improvements in transportation, both roads and vehicles, have dramatically reduced the travelling time, and magnified the differential between the smaller and larger centres. Unfortunately there are difficulties in predicting growth or decline in rural communities as a result of changing rural economics and social structures (Smailes and Hugo, 2003).
Wallace and Boylan (2006) documented the series of changes that have impacted upon rural communities over the last twenty years. These relate to the reliance upon agriculture, and on changing economic and political trends. Wallace and Boylan used Pollard (2002: 13-16) as a foundation for a useful summary of trends in rural Australia:

- By the mid 1990s Australian agriculture contributed only around 3% to GDP. Australia no longer rides on the sheep's back;
- The median age for all persons employed in agriculture in 2002 was 44 years, substantially higher than 38 years for all persons employed in all industries;
- The upward movement in the median age of farmers reflects fewer young people entering agriculture to take the place of ageing workers;
- Farms have become larger, and there is a corresponding decline in the importance of small farm operators within the sector (the number of farms has decreased from around 200 000 in 1961 to 110 000 in 2001 (Hooper et al, 2002);
- In smaller settlements the exodus is very much dominated by young people. Further, country towns rely on people such as bank managers, school teachers, clergy or health workers to contribute their skills and expertise to the welfare of the wider local community. However, as government and other services are withdrawn from these areas, so too are the staff members. The resultant depletion of local stocks of human capital has had a debilitating effect on the smaller rural community;
- The adoption of new technology is now more important than ever as farmers try to maintain levels of profitability in the face of rising costs, worsening terms of trade, and restrictions on land use and farming practices imposed by governments and the economy, particularly as society becomes more aware of the need to develop sustainable farming practices;
- In addition, high levels of welfare dependence also constrain some communities, resulting from high unemployment and income levels well below state averages;
- Farmers have recently experienced times of extreme hardship, brought about by an unreliable climate and volatile market forces. Currently, with Australia's high exposure to international markets, and a domestic environment in which farmers are expected to operate without government assistance, many farmers are experiencing financial pressure to restructure their operations.

Alston and Kent (2004) have documented the crippling social effects of the drought:

*The significant social impacts occurring as a result of the drought include serious erosion of income for farms and small businesses, increasing rural poverty, increased workloads (both on-farm and off), the need to seek alternative income, health (including mental health) and welfare issue, problematic service access, overload on service providers, declining educational access and particular issues for women and men on farms, business operators, the aged, young people and children (p. xiii).*

- A growing environmental movement has also impacted upon rural communities, with concerns in New South Wales around salinity, bio-diversity and habitat loss, tilling practices and the loss of topsoil, and a growing debate around GMOs (Tonts, 2005; Share, Lawrence and Gray, 2000); and,
- The general loss of social, human and natural capital as a result of globalisation.
The impact of these changes should not be understated. Cocklin and Alston (2003: 1) provide a concise summary of the current concerns for Australian rural communities:

Many factors have contributed to this pattern of social and economic decline across the country. Falling commodity prices, cost-price squeezes, metropolitan-centred social and economic policies, extreme weather patterns, alternating periods of flood and drought, population migration, and changes in patterns of ownership of rural economic enterprises each contribute to a potent mix of forces.

It is in such environments that schools operate, and where the complex responses to staffing and other policy initiative must operate. It is potentially complicated by what was seen in The Age as a presidential, party-based urban governance model in Australia, which disadvantages rural communities (Warby, 1999).

Rethinking our view of rural environments – the adoption of a rural lens

The notion of a rural lens is therefore useful to our exploration of the changing nature of rural places. In essence it involves a reversal of thinking – to begin in rural places, looking outwards for policy rather than being reactionary to policy developed in other places and times. It appears to be a notion of particular moment in our current political and educational context.

The rural lens has drawn international attention. It finds expression in a Canadian federal government initiative that focuses on a recognition of the principles of equity, difference and the uniqueness of rural locations as government policies and programs are developed and implemented. In Canada, the rural lens is a strategy that seeks to sustain the social, cultural, economic attributes of rural communities as well as strengthening their community capacity building options through the provision of contextually relevant services, of which education and the staffing of rural and remote schools is one cornerstone.
The *rural lens* poses critical questions for policy and program developers and decision makers about quality of life, accessibility to and delivery of service provision and measuring the impact of government policies on rural communities and their people (Rural Secretariat, 2007). For education systems charged with the responsibility for the staffing of rural and remote schools, these questions are essential for the provision of a high quality education.

The challenge thus emerging for rural educators armed with a *rural lens* exploring education provision in a changing rural environment needs to be challenge by two fundamental issues, these being Challenge-Deficit theories of rural education (Ankrah-Dove, 1982), and our growing understanding of the concept of Place (Bryden, 2003; Gray, 1991).

**Challenge Deficit theory.**

This widely used theory was developed by Linda Ankrah-Dove (1982), and draws upon theoretical foundations in psychology linked with personal and job satisfaction and sociological concepts associated with personal and professional adjustment and person-environment fit. The theory uses these concepts, and then applies them to staffing rural and remote schools.

In this model, Ankrah-Dove (1982) argues that teachers (either pre-service or in-service) predominantly hold either a *challenge* or a *deficit* viewpoint about rural appointments, rural schools and their communities. The model effectively adopts a *rural lens* to question teacher belief systems about rural places as well as the issues which drive departmental staffing practices and policies.

A beginning teacher or an experienced teacher with a *Challenge* viewpoint typically is focussed on the special qualities of teaching and living in rural places, and then provides the intrinsic motivation and interests for the teacher. This view would suggest two fundamental components to effectively address rural staffing issues. Firstly in the preparation of teachers, pre-service education programs must include a rural education subject and practicum program that will significantly foster the concept of rural teaching as a career focus. This strategy will be re-visited late. Secondly, the model argues that the on-going professional learning of in-service teachers must be supported through creative and responsive methods that provide access to, and participation in professional development programs offered locally and from regional places. Incentives that are designed to support the professional learning needs of these rural teachers are essential.

For the novitiate and experienced teacher with a *Deficit* viewpoint the focus is on what the rural school and community do NOT have. As Ankrah-Dove (1982) states “Life is nasty, brutish and short …… it is deficient in all the qualities which would attract teachers” (p.13). This is particularly true for the two year *tourist teacher* often found in rural schools – doing their time, and escaping back to the city or the coast as soon as they can. Applying this viewpoint, two staffing strategies might be identified:

- **Compulsion**  Compulsory appointment of teachers (new or experienced) to difficult-to-staff or hard-to staff school (eg. bonded scholarships); and,

- **Incentives**  Compensatory financial programs for the hardships of teaching and living in a rural place. These incentives include extra salary, cheap accommodation, travel concession, medical subsidies, faster promotional opportunities elsewhere, faster accrual of long service leave, and extra pay for staying beyond the minimal period of appointment.
Such strategies focus on ‘getting a teacher in front of a class by whatever means’. The deficit viewpoint, more often than not, seeks a short term ‘fix’ that will solve the immediate staffing crisis for 1 or 2 years. But the underlying origins of the problem are not addressed and the same crises will come back in 2 years. These strategies are exemplars of what is often seen as urban-based, bureaucratic models of thinking about rural staffing. The impacts upon the quality of education in rural areas as a result of these deficit models have long been recognised:

*The urgency and difficulty of filling vacancies in particular areas often means that short term expediency (the deficit model) over-rides longer term purposes to bring about educational improvement (the challenge model).* (Watson, Hatton, Squires and Soliman, 1989: 2).

The challenge viewpoint is supported by a rural lens. Pre-service programs that include studies about rural society, rural schools and their communities and the conditions of living and teaching in rural and remote places are critical to such an approach. Programs may include creative strategies such as the Beyond the Line initiative between New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSWDET, 2001) rural districts and universities across the state. A similar program has operated between the Western Australian Department of Education, the WA Minerals Councils and state universities to support the rural and remote internship program (Lincoln, 2001), with new insights and findings about the Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP) being reported at the 2007 SPERA conference by Lock (2007).

The second important focus for a sound rural staffing policy with strategies derived from the challenge viewpoint centres on in-service education, the identification of personal and professional learning needs, and then tailoring the systemic and school support to meet these needs. In reality, this approach is akin to the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that teachers develop and implement for their own students. The challenge model asserts that it is essential for the rural school leader and rural district administrators to have effective, functional and teacher focussed IEPs for each and every teacher under their jurisdiction. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s inquiry in rural and remote education (HREOC, 2000) asserted the value for teacher professional learning when it identified the important need to provide ‘additional days of guaranteed leave for professional development’ (pp. 42-43). The key outcome of this strategy ensures the rural teacher’s professional learning needs are being fully met which promotes both personal and professional job-related satisfaction. These initiatives also reflect the issues identified by a rural lens.

**Research on notions of deficit**

However, even students involved in studies of rural places have an outsider’s and often metro-centric view of rural living. A group of final year primary and secondary teacher trainees at a rural university were assessed in 2006 and 2007 to explore their understandings of rural place. We asked these students (n=65+74=139) to rate their understandings of a number of social, health and welfare issues by comparing their understanding of rural living against urban living. No significant differences were found across the two years, but major differences were found between students understandings of rural living and reality. They appeared to be exploring the questions from an urban, rather than a rural lens. They reflected a view of rural which may well have more to do with the myths rather than the reality of rural living. Figure 1 indicates the issues where student understandings were discrepant, to the point where over half of the measures investigated indicated a stereotypic view of rural living, rather than the realities described in the literature as students considered if each variable was similar in rural and urban places, or more evident in one that the other.
**Figure 1: Pre-service understandings of the rural-urban divide**

The results described are all the more alarming as these students had engaged in rural practicum and were enrolled in a rural education subject. They are ill-equipped for rural appointment, in that they still carried unrealistic views of rural living. Their views of rural do not reflect a rural lens, but rather an outsider’s and often urban lens.

**Focussing the rural lens on rural place**

The concept that place as an important factor in affecting teacher recruitment and retention is a new and significant challenge for educational authorities. Place recognises that uniqueness, value and relevance that the history, cultural value system, language, social infrastructure, the impact of the environment and the economic realities have on shaping the local community in ways that define it as different to other places. Rural places by their very isolation from the large urban population centres develop in ways that to an outsider seem ‘traditional’, ‘conservative’, and ‘narrow in their views’ yet to the local are a natural part of their daily life.

Place based education is about education that connects with the local traditions, seek active local community input into the teaching programs and content, and ensures the learning of children is contextually relevant to their place. This hallmark feature of place based education is central to the various federal and state education authorities focus on quality teaching and learning frameworks. Within Australia, the Queensland Productive Pedagogies program, the Essential Leanings in Tasmania and Victoria, the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia, and the Quality Teaching Framework in New South Wales all emphasise the central role that contextually relevant, culturally sensitive, highly valued content knowledge have in helping children understand who they are, where they come from, and the ways in which their community contributes to society.
Yet, as Bryden and Boylan (2004: 95) point out, herein lies the educational conundrum or dilemma:

The movement towards standards based curricula, coupled with regular assessment regimes of students, creates a set of values and beliefs about what is important in education. The more education is standardised, the less room there is for providing education on the local language, culture, history and environment. The importance of community for rural locales as they address issues of falling populations, especially with their youth, takes on a central role. Teachers and schools are the essential ingredient within a rural community, have a critical part to play in affirming the value of place.

At this point, one of the major human resource issues for educational staffing operations and rural schools becomes evident. In Australia most pre-service teacher education course are based in the metropolises of capital cities. The majority of students enrolled in teacher education courses also are drawn from metropolitan schools. For these courses and their students, rural schools and their communities are ‘unknown’, ‘to be feared’, ‘to be avoided’ and have little connection with these students’ life experiences. Yet, as Ankrah-Dove (1982) argued this fear of the (rural) unknown can be reduced through more targeted preparation for rural teaching. Ramsey (2000: 53) supports this view when he observed that in NSW the two rurally based universities have a significant role in teacher education in teacher preparation for regional and rural communities. However, as Boylan (2005) pointed out in a review of all teacher education programs offered in New South Wales, the reality was that only one university had a compulsory subject in rural education. An investigation of the pre-service teacher education courses offered by the five major Western Australian universities revealed a similar finding to that in New South Wales: only one university offered a specific subject (or unit) on rural education. The dominance of the urban, at the expense of the rural lens is clearly evident in course design.
Yet innovative approaches are possible. The RATEP program at James Cook University (Roberts, 2005) and the Mixed Media Program at University of Waikato (Yates, 2006) both represent institutional responsiveness to offering pre-service teacher education programs in the local rural places. In many ways, these initiatives reflect the operation of the rural lens. Rather than operate traditional pre-service teacher education programs in urban or regional places, what is best for the rural community and its people is placed uppermost in the design of these programs.

It should also be noted that understandings of rural place can be changed quickly by programs which immerse pre-service teachers in rural contexts. Work with CSU students completing Beyond the Line in 2006 revealed significant changes in understandings of rural/remote contexts within the single week of the program. Students had a heightened awareness of the issues facing rural teachers, and were able to make informed decisions about professional life in rural communities. Students reported an almost universal desire to work in rural places after the experience, but were realistic in their assessment of the implication of working in small rural communities.

**Rural Staffing**

Using a rural lens to explore staffing must be couched within a broader context. There are a number of issues to explore, which are outlined below.

1. **Changing teacher demographics**

A significant allied human resource issue that will directly impact on rural schools and their staffing is the aging teacher workforce and the need to recruit significant numbers of new teachers to manage the teacher workforce planning process. Many authors, both in Australia and overseas (eg. HREOC, 2000; AEU, 2001; and Williams, 2002), declare that teacher supply is facing severe shortages which will worsen in the near future. School teachers are more concentrated in the 45 – 54 age groups report the National Teacher Supply and Demand Working Party (NTSDWP) (1998). The 45 – 49 and 50 – 54 age groups each have over 22,000 members, this being double the number of teachers in any other 5 year age bracket reported the Standing Committee. MCEETYA reported in 2001, that the average age of teachers was 43.1 years of age and the median age of teachers was 49 years. Roberts (2005) focusing on New South Wales public education sector predicted that 27% of the teaching workforce will be eligible for retirement in 2007 (this year!). He further predicts that 50,000 teachers will be eligible for retirement between 2007 and 2012. The New South Wales Department of Education and Training predict that during the period 2012 – 2021, a further 15,000 teachers will reach retirement age. A similar scenario is predicted in Western Australia by the Gerard Daniels (2007) review. This report identified that Western Australian teachers are, on average, older than teachers in other states and territories with over 30% of its workforce over 50 years of age. Common sense suggests that the predicted shortfall will be more pronounced in the rural areas and hard-to-staff schools not only in New South Wales (Smith, 2002) and Western Australia (Gerard Daniels, 2007), but in all Australian states and territories.

Some recent research into secondary teacher shortages in rural and remote places reveals some disturbing scenarios. In rural and remote parts of Australia the shortage of secondary teachers in Science and Mathematics is more acute than in other parts of Australia (Lyons, Cookney, Panizzon, Parnell and Pegg, 2006). Rodd (2007) reported that about 2 in 5 beginning teachers nationally had taught in a subject area outside of their pre-service specialisation. Collectively these researchers raised questions about the quality of
mathematics and science education in rural areas and suggest that this teaching out-of-area experience may be a significant contributor to the high resignation rates in early career teachers (i.e. in the first 5 years of teaching). These researchers also found that the likelihood for a secondary teacher to be teaching out-of-area was linked to place. In rural locations, teachers were twice as likely, and in remote schools they were four times more likely to be teaching out-of-their area of specialisation.

When the general demographics of the teaching workforce are examined, typically rural schools:

- are more likely to be staffed with teachers with less classroom experience;
- have lower teacher retention rates; and,
- have a younger teaching staff profile for whom teaching may not be their life long career (Ingersoll, 1998; Harris and Jensz, 2006; and Harris, et al 2005);
- are places where secondary teachers are teaching outside their areas of training and expertise.

Rethinking staffing and teacher preparation programs for rural schools with a rural lens rather than the more traditional discipline based or urban school model seems more appropriate. These models might include preparation programs that have a K-10, multigrade and/or multiple-disciplinary secondary teaching focus.

2. Strategies to address rural staffing

Drawing upon the ideas presented in the earlier part of this paper, there are a number of strategies that can be adopted, implemented and managed by education systems and their staffing operations that can provide fruitful processes for staffing rural and remote schools.

Boylan (2005) identified four key strategies which address rural teacher staffing issues. These recommendation were:

1. Rural scholarship programs

When education systems offered targeted rural pre-service teacher education scholarships, this strategy has been demonstrated as an effective recruitment strategy. The targeting can be in two forms: a) offering scholarships to students from rural places; and b) offering scholarships for initial appointment to a rural school. The research suggests that when scholarships are awarded to rural students they are much more likely to accept a rural appointment and to remain in rural schools for much of their career (e.g. Smith-Davis, 1989; Boylan and McSwan, 1998; Roberts, 2005; Gerard Daniels, 2007). This strategy has been shown to produce long-term benefits for systemic education employers in staffing rural and remote schools.

2. Tertiary rural education subjects

Boylan (2004) reviewed the literature from Australian national and state inquiries into rural teacher education and identified the need to provide specific subjects that examine the conditions of living and teaching in rural places as a component of all pre-service teacher education programs. In 2005, Boylan, drawing from the earlier work of Clarke (1990), Tomlinson (1994), Gibson and King (1998), and Roberts (2005), identified that six essential program elements were essential components for designing specific rural education subjects. These essential elements will now be described.
• **Teaching and learning focussed.** This element includes exploration, examination, developing understandings of, and engaging in rural classroom place-based pedagogy practices.

• **Administration focussed.** Pre-service students need to become familiar with a range of school related administrative responsibilities and be able to effectively carry out these roles.

• **Community focussed.** For the beginning teacher, a rural appointment often means it will be the first time they are required to live and work in a community, something that can be a difficult aspect of their adjustment to rural teaching. As part of their pre-service preparation, students need to develop understandings of and be provided with opportunities to examine, analyse and discuss rural community dynamics.

• **Personal focussed.** The pre-service teacher education students need to appreciate and reflect upon their personal lifestyle, recreational and socialising forces and analyse their suitability for a rural appointment.

• **Field experience focussed.** This element focuses on the provision of a diverse set of practical experiences typically developed through field based experiences in rural, regional, remote and/or isolated places.

• **Professional learning focussed.** The final element creates the link between the pre-service and the in-service education of rural teachers. The focus of this element is developing in the students a commitment to lifelong learning, and developing understanding about and strategies for how professional learning can be accessed from a rural location.

The unreceptiveness of universities to adopt a *rural lens* as a focus or potential focus in their pre-service teacher education courses has already been identified in both New South Wales and Western Australia as a major concern. Rural staffing is more difficult as a result.

3. **Rural teaching experiences**

Closely allied to the tertiary institution based subjects addressing rural education is the absolutely essential requirement that students engage in a rural practice teaching experience. Policy initiatives by various Australian state departments of education have been mentioned earlier in this paper to support a rural practicum experience. For the teacher education institution, there is an expectation that the institution would provide financial support to assist the student to travel to and find suitable accommodation in these rural locations (HREOC, 2000). Some of the components of this field experience should include:

• teaching experiences in rural schools, other rural settings and their communities;

• rural placements occurring early in the program and culminating with a rural internship towards the conclusion of the program (eg. Lincoln, 2001; and Lock, 2007); and,

• engaging in specific short-term rural sampler experiences such as the *Beyond the Line* program (NSWDET, 2000). Boylan and Wallace (2002) have reported on some encouraging rural recruitment benefits for the NSWDET from this program.
4. Adjustment, transition and induction

The final major recommendation from Boylan’s (2004) literature review focused on the degree of support provided by the pre-service tertiary institution and the systemic teacher employer organisations during the first year of appointment. The literature clearly identified that the management of personal and professional adjustment issues in the first year of teaching significantly improves the retention of the rural teacher. The provision of induction and mentor programs was demonstrated as effective strategies that addressed not only the organisational and professional issues of rural teaching but also the social and personal adjustment issues that beginning rural teacher’s experience.

Collectively these four strategies have a recruitment and appointment focus. They draw upon the Challenge viewpoint from Ankrah-Dove (1982) and present rural teaching as positive, a career pathway and as an exciting and rewarding experience. What is equally important for these strategies is the recognition that no one sector or organisation can succeed by itself. Rural teacher selection and appointment must be a multi-party cooperative strategies between the educational authorities, tertiary institutions and the rural schools and their communities.

3. Retaining rural teachers

The NSWTF (2002) asserted that retaining teachers beyond the minimum appointment period does make a positive contribution to the school, the community and the students’ education.

Similarly, Vinson (2002:104) recognised that teacher retention had a significant community capacity building effect when he found that ‘the knowledge and capacities of resident [rural] teachers are considered an invaluable part of the social infrastructure’ in a rural school and its community.

Earlier research by Boylan and McSwan (1998) on long-staying rural teachers and why they chose to remain resulted in the development of a teacher retention model. In this model four significant influences affected a rural teacher’s decision to remain. These influences were:

• **Within classroom activities.** This component focussed on the intrinsically and personally satisfying aspects of teaching children. The teachers espoused a strong Challenge viewpoint dwelling on aspects such as: quality teaching and learning opportunities, the interactions with children; and, catering for diverse needs of their children;

• **Whole school level activities.** This aspect highlighted the level of acceptance within the school, the staff collegiality; and, opportunities to take on administrative roles;

• **Community related activities.** The aspect recognised the way in which the teacher was accepted as a community member; their level of community participation and integration; and the community capacity building contributions they made; and,

• **The teacher’s family.** The final set of influences related to the teacher’s family and included a diverse set of considerations such as: quality of lifestyle considerations; accessibility to their extended family network; employment opportunities for the teacher’s partner; the availability of secondary and post secondary education; and, personal satisfaction and contentment with their rural lifestyle.
Boylan and McSwan’s (1998) research emphasised how important the first and fourth factors in the retention model were for successful teacher retention. This model suggests a number of strategies that administrators can incorporate into their retention strategies and practices which support teachers in rural schools through providing opportunities to engage in professional development activities and regular access to curriculum support personnel.

One of the important messages to come from the literature so far is for education systems to realise that recruitment strategies are not the same as retention strategies. The failure to recognise this distinction due often to applying the urban or bureaucratic lens is most often evident in the types of ‘retention strategies’ that are offered to rural teachers. Often these strategies are tacitly based on the Deficit viewpoint in which ‘incentives’ are offered as rewards for staying to compensate for the hardships and deficiencies of teaching and living in that rural place. These strategies fail to consider and use the rural lens.

For example, many state education systems operate a ‘Transfer Point System’ in which the more remote school is assigned the greater the number of transfer point that a teacher can accrue annually. Applying Ankrah-Dove’s model, the transfer points system is really a strategy that provides inducements for teachers to leave the rural school. It implies a mode of thinking that suggests ‘a road out of here’ thinking by metro-centric bureaucrats. It is not a system that actively retains a teacher in the rural school. To focus on this point and using a Challenge viewpoint the key question to ask is: ‘What is needed to stay here?’ For this question to be answered, the rural lens seems appropriate.

One clue as to how to answer this question is evident from the research by Vinson (2002: 107) who reported that their inquiry in public education in NSW found compelling evidence [was] placed before it of the special difficulties and associated costs faced by country teachers in accessing professional development. The Vinson report recommended that the funding level for professional development of rural teachers be 1.5 times the level for urban teachers. It is pleasing to report that this recognition of place as a determinant of accessibility to professional development has been accepted and implemented by the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. Within the Gerard Daniels’ (2007) report for the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, teacher retention in rural and remote schools is identified as a significant issue. While a number of the suggested strategies to improve retention have the urban lens and Deficit viewpoint of rural teaching, there are some promising suggestions that employ a rural lens that focus on teacher professional support networks, partner employment initiatives (p.37) and improving job satisfaction through better support structures for teachers (p.30). Another potentially innovative policy designed to support professional learning of teachers was released in the Federal governments 2007 Budget in which a $5000 per teacher package to foster on-going professional learning was released. The initiative was limited to 1000 teachers nationally rather than becoming accessible to all teachers and especially those in rural and remote places. Finally, the recent review of American literature on teacher recruitment and retention (Guarino, Santibanez and Daley, 2006) identified a significant positive relationship between schools and districts that a) provided well planned induction and mentoring programs, b) instituted collegial professional support networks, and c) provided more autonomy for their new-to-school teachers and a higher retention rate. Collectively, these are effective retention strategies as they are based on the Challenge viewpoint.
Dwelling on the importance of on-going professional learning for rural teachers, there are a range of possible strategies or ‘incentives’ that education systems can generate and implement. However, it must be emphasised that the urban lens or K-Mart mode of thinking that ‘one size fits all’ will not work for all rural teachers in all rural places as it fails to account for the fact that professional learning varies due the factors such as the individual needs of the teacher, the needs of rural schools, the needs of children in these locations, and the stage of the teacher’s career. Earlier in the paper the uniqueness of each rural place was emphasised as a fundamental part of the staffing process, in the same way the uniqueness of each teacher in a rural place must also be recognised. This recognition builds on the application of a rural lens and links back to the concept of an IEP on professional learning for each rural teacher. One possible consequence from this recognition suggests that the educational leaders at the school and district levels need to enter into productive and negotiated dialogue with their rural teachers to develop learning plans that identify needs and means of successfully meeting these needs. This could form an important part of the induction program for new-to-school or beginning teachers and be included as part of the annual performance review process for all teachers.

Some retention strategies that educational organisation can implement through their regions, districts and schools include:

- **Professional development.** The provision of in-service education that is well supported both financially and by release staffing that are offered in the rural place as well as in larger regional and urban venues. In particular, the opportunity to engage in sustained learning through participation in extended courses and programs of professional learning has been recognised as crucial for professional growth. (HREOC, 2000);

- **Peer support / contact / collegiality.** The way in which schools, districts and regions provide sustained induction and mentor programs not only for beginning teachers but experienced teachers who are new to that rural place has been clearly identified as an important retention strategy. In recent years, the large proportion of beginning teachers who leave within the first three to five years of commencing their teaching career has prompted a significant focus on improving strategies not only to support new teachers but also as a retention strategy. Research in New South Wales revealed that the difficult-to-staff schools are the places where a disproportionately large percentage of beginning teachers are appointed in each year of the staffing operation [30% of new teachers are appointed to 3% of schools which are in hard-to-staff schools] (New South Wales Public Education Council, 2005);

- **Lifelong education / Further study.** Systemic support for rural teachers to undertake further professional study related to pedagogy, curriculum, educational leadership, upgrading content knowledge through enrolment in tertiary education courses such as MEds / Graduate Diplomas or Certificates / TAFE courses which are accessible through distance education provision;

- **Subscription to professional journals.** Supporting the professional reading of rural and remote teachers through paid subscription to the relevant professional journals which are identified by the individual teacher. For a teacher, this may include subscription to broad focused journals such as Australian Journal of Education, Education in Rural Australia as well as specialist journals focussing on particular curriculum areas such as. PETA-PEN; Investigating Science; Australian Primary Mathematics Classroom. Professional reading engages the teacher with current ideas and issues about teaching
which ensure that the teacher is informed, up-to-date and knowledgeable about developments in teaching;

- **Membership of professional associations.** Allied to professional journal subscriptions is membership of the relevant professional organisations that are most relevant to the rural teacher’s areas of expertise. Membership provides access to a network of like-minded teachers who share a common interest and passion in curriculum and pedagogy. It also provides information about and access to special events, curriculum materials reviews and current directions within that specialised curriculum area;

- **Professional study leave.** In a number of Australian states and territories, the concept of providing the rural or remote teacher with the opportunity to undertake an extended period of study leave focussing on school leadership and organisational strategies, teaching practices, curriculum development and implementation, and pedagogy has been supported by educational organisations; and,

- **Conference attendance support.** Another component of professional learning for the rural teacher is to be supported to attend state and national conferences in education that are relevant to their teaching specialisations. This support includes not only the travel and accommodation costs for the teacher but also the provision of a relief teacher to continue the teaching program for this teacher’s class.

**Conclusion**

The notion of adopting a *rural lens* is in many ways an old idea, in that over a long period of time SPERA has worked to improve the lot of rural education. What is new is the sense of driving decision making from within, by arguing to abandon traditional staffing mechanisms to find one which gives voice back to rural communities. It is one which starts with the real needs of remote/rural communities to support students and learning in more appropriate ways.

In essence the notion of a *rural lens* has political implications, as we move beyond accepted practice to explore cooperative approaches to teacher preparation that involve communities, universities and departments of education in attempts to rethink teacher preparation and professional development. It leads to rethinking how teachers are prepared for rural communities – to ensure that rural needs are served by people who see careers in rural places – the places these teachers know and understand. Such thinking not only enhances professional satisfaction for teachers, but leads to real improvements in student outcomes as teachers grow into and with their communities. It is a *lens* worth looking into!
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