

COMPANION PAPER 6

Different Places, Familiar Spaces: Rural and Remote Education as Situated Practice

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Education in rural and remote Australia is essential because the skills and knowledges for entire communities depend on its success. The future of rural education in New South Wales requires genuine and productive partnerships between the NSW Department of Education & Training, universities, TAFEs, rural schools, and rural communities. An emphasis on the ‘rural’ aspects of ‘rural education’ needs to be kept in focus by those concerned with rural education, in that place matters - all policies and practices are located within social, cultural, spatial and historical landscapes. Each rural place is unique – the school, the community - each having specific needs and priorities. While it is necessary to a degree to generalise ‘rural’ for the purposes of policy and reform, the uniqueness of place also needs to be acknowledged. As such, a ‘one size fits all’ approach is inadequate for addressing the educational issues of rural and remote New South Wales.

While regional, rural and remote NSW is often homogenised as simply “out there” by those who imagine it all to be the same, these areas are in fact quite diverse, and the importance of place and context warrant closer attention. Thus, we are framing this paper with the notion of **situated practices** in order to examine both the specificities of particular places as well as the more enduring trends in rural and remote education. We have been using situated practices as a guiding framework for research in *The Rural (Teacher) Education Project*¹, which has been investigating how best to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with country teaching and rural schooling.

The ‘situated’ aspect of this concept signals that place matters, and that far from being a unitary site for education, place and context create different dynamics that call for differentiated approaches and responses - from the school level to the system level. The notion of ‘practices’ captures the full range of actions, values, meanings and understandings that comprise the acts of teaching and learning in rural and remote NSW. In what follows we will examine issues related to two fundamental aspects of this model - **situated leadership** and **situated pedagogies** [See Diagram 1]. These organising categories allow us to take a broad sweep across a range of issues integral to rural and remote education, while focussing attention on two crucial components of the teaching/learning dynamic.

Situated Leadership

Viewing leadership as situated entails shifting from models that understand it as either positional or as an amalgam of qualities that confers on one the status of “a leader.” Instead, situating leadership necessitates viewing it as pedagogy, with a focus on assisting students to achieve high academic and social outcomes through productive pedagogies and productive assessment (Lingard, Hayes, Mills, & Christie, 2003).

Quality leadership

The diversity of rural and remote settings makes it necessary to examine leadership in a variety of ways. For the rural/remote school, leadership issues are site specific and are related significantly to factors of distance, location, space and place - overlaid by local community issues. Leadership in this setting is broadly conceived - the appointed positions of Principal and school executive, but also including teachers as leaders. Beyond a positional form of leadership, we can also conceptualise it as *positioned* (McConaghy, 1998) in order to acknowledge issues related to the politics of location.

¹ The Rural (Teacher) Education Project, or R(T)EP, is an ARC-funded Linkage project partnership between the NSW Department of Education & Training, the University of New England, and Charles Sturt University, which has been interested in promoting quality learning outcomes by examining teacher education, broadly conceived, for and in rural NSW.

It is in fact this locational aspect that forges the agenda for leadership priorities in a school. Rural schools can face instability resulting from ongoing staff turnover at all levels from Principal/executive to classroom teacher. For many school leaders issues relating to staffing predominate, becoming at times a source of frustration and anxiety. The needs of beginning teachers, combined with a young and inexperienced executive, can dominate a school leader's consciousness. The rural Principal balances educational and visionary aspects of their role with, in many cases, the problematics emerging from issues of staffing of the school.

Associated with a lack of applicants for leadership positions in rural/remote schools is a corollary disadvantage of the incumbents having no prior experience in the particular role. Compounding this is the number of positions filled from within the same school, potentially making for limited experience. The positive side to this phenomenon, however, is that rural and remote schools offer avenues for teachers at an early stage of their careers to experience leadership roles. Such situations allow elements of youth, enthusiasm and entrepreneurship to emerge.

Leadership issues are also paramount in the arena of school/community dynamics. The Principal plays a potentially important role in the community. Their style and degree of connectivity is an inherent element in this relationship and for the success of the school (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003).

The Department of Education & Training can engage in "positioned" responses to many of these leadership issues by endorsing more local decision-making, particularly around the recruitment, hiring, and professional development opportunities available to schools [and communities].

Professional learning communities

Related to issues of leadership in schools are issues connected to the emergence and sustainability of professional learning communities. Numerous factors underpin the nature of professional development for rural and remote schools. A range of professional development avenues should be utilised where appropriate and where possible - from preservice and in service, formal and informal, and in-school and out of school experiences.

Universities are increasingly acknowledging and engaging with issues related to preparing teachers to teach and lead in rural and remote locations. At Charles Sturt University, for example, we are revising core teacher education subjects to foreground issues related to the importance of place, learning to "read" place, multi-age pedagogies, and providing place-based experiences. Likewise, the Department's successful Beyond the Line Program adds richness to the complex endeavours of preparing teachers for rural life and work by extending preservice teachers' boundaries of expectation and experience of 'the bush' (McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004).

Many schools successfully foreground the importance of induction of new teachers and the professional development of beginning teachers. The value and effectiveness of the Head Teacher Mentor role in this context is regarded as an important initiative that should continue.

In taking up their new role many beginning teachers move considerable distances from personal networks. The ramifications of this, both personally and professionally, play a significant role in teacher welfare, and as a result, student outcomes. In-school support processes are fundamental, but are often variable in the translation from policy into practice. The development of both informal and formal learning communities in the school allows a school to address critical local needs.

Attendance at externally offered professional development activities is hampered by concerns of distance, time and safety of travel (Vinson, 2002). A paucity of access to personnel and courses from the DET and other agencies requires initiative on the part of the school and teacher in order to fully utilise such development opportunities and for the DET to acknowledge the difficulties faced. Information and communications technologies are proving useful in overcoming some of these hurdles.

Due to the nature of the place, school personnel often establish their own professional links, employing creative ways to operationalise and maintain these. For staff members who intend to keep teaching in rural and remote schools, outside avenues are important if they are to experience professional development and renewal. Networking teachers within and across rural townships engenders productive partnerships for professional development and sense of community.

New teachers gain their professional support eclectically. Effective mentor teachers and supervisors are integral to professional growth, yet commonly they face a shortage of time in which to fulfil these roles. In addition to their mentor and supervisor, their fellow teachers can affect the new teacher with their knowledge and skills. These shared resources are critical to a successful sense of community within a school. The development of networks, the use of technology and web-based learning are all areas whose potential is still to be fully realised. Maintaining professional networks - in person, via phone, or via the Internet - between schools and towns is worthwhile as these collegial networks are important from a personal and professional point of view in a rural setting.

Situated Pedagogies

Drawing on McConaghy's (2002) notion of situated pedagogies, as evolving out of but moving beyond authentic pedagogy² and productive pedagogy³, we want to foreground issues related to taking place seriously in rural and remote education. This model asserts that place matters, and grounds this assertion in an investigation of quality teaching and learning dynamics, quality leadership, quality school/community dynamics, and quality professional learning communities. Since we have already addressed leadership and professional learning communities, we will focus in what follows on quality teaching and learning and quality school/community dynamics.

Quality teaching and learning

We first must consider how we attract highly qualified teachers to rural and remote schools. This necessitates close ties with universities - both so that there is a degree of curricular coherence to address issues like multi-modal/distance teaching, proficient use of a range of ICTs, and how we also promote the bush as the "crucible" for the rest of the system. Many lengthy, successful teaching careers are forged in the bush, even if those teachers do not always remain teaching in rural and remote areas. Issues of teacher retention require that we think through quality of life [at work] issues in rural/remote communities. We must also address issues of renewal in the bush, so that long-serving rural teachers are afforded opportunities for professional renewal and rejuvenation - an issue detailed earlier in the situated leadership section.

Thinking through the lens of situated pedagogies raises issues related to pedagogical leadership as a key to quality teaching/learning dynamics. We must think deeply about responsive and situated pedagogies that are place-sensitive - moving them from being "just good teaching" to contextualised teaching that accounts for a recognition of difference. Rural and remote teaching invariably raises issues around Distance Education and the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). These partial solutions can help to mediate the effects of distance, although they are unable to eliminate all of the challenges.

Quality teaching and learning also draws our attention to curricular issues that might include capitalising on a sense of place in rural schooling, and acknowledging the centrality of an authentic, connected curriculum - one that recognises people with/in places. Attention must be focused on providing place-based experiences for rural students. Examples of how this could play out in classrooms are being explored in the research project entitled *Literacy and the Environment: A Situated Study of Multi-Mediated Literacy, Sustainability, Local Knowledges and Educational Change*⁴ which explores teaching and learning opportunities within the Murray-Darling River basin.

² See Newmann, Marks & Gamoran (1996) and Newmann & Associates (1996)

³ See Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (2001) and Lingard, Mills & Hayes (2000)

⁴ This ARC-funded Linkage project between the Primary English Teachers Association [PETA], the University of South Australia and Charles Sturt University is undertaking research into strategies for developing environmental literacy and expressive communication within primary schools. It focuses on PETA's *Special Forever* program, which is funded by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission.

To this end, when place matters, issues of quality teaching and learning need to not only consider issues such as authentic, connected curriculum and pedagogical leadership at a number of levels, but also quality school-community relationships.

School-community dynamics

The significance of the relationship between the rural school and the rural community cannot be underestimated. Integral to McConaghy's (2002) 'situated pedagogies' model is the inclusion of parents and the wider community as fundamental to positive school/community relationships. McConaghy claims that in no other public schooling context is the community more fundamental than within the rural schooling context. Partnership between the school and community would ideally ensure the future success of rural education and of rural student outcomes. Rural and remote education entails schooling *from* the bush, in addition to the more commonly understood schooling *for* the bush. Rural schools are often positive focal places in rural communities where a spirit of action and empowerment, learning and togetherness is espoused and enacted.

The effect that the wider rural community culture(s) have on the school population – students, teachers, Principals, parents and guardians - is significant for schools and individuals, but most importantly for young rural people. Overcoming issues of low attendance, poor retention rates and below average student outcomes requires the community to play an active and decision-making role in rural and remote schools. For example, Indigenous students' attitude towards schooling and perceptions of their current and future prospects have improved where Indigenous parents, carers and the community have been involved in the school (HREOC, 2000).

Community and family learning traditions play a significant part in the way in which individual students think about education, their place in the community, their place in the world, and thus their future. This in turn affects their learning capacities, development and aspirations. Similarly, the school affects the community via their ethos and actions. Ideally, the school and community work together to create and maintain levels of positivity, sense(s) of identity and self-worth, which play a significant part in shaping wellbeing, social capital and resilience (Vinson, 2004).

Furthermore, the effect that the community has in the personal/social lives of teachers and the ramifications this has for teachers' professional experiences are highlighted in the rural and remote setting. Social inclusion and involvement - the way the individual teacher contributes to, and manages living in, a rural and remote community, and their adjustments to their highly visible public role (the 'fishbowl' syndrome) - directly influences overall satisfaction, professionalism and retention. The 'fishbowl' nature of many rural and remote towns requires the teacher to become more involved in the community. This often burdens the individual with community expectations of roles, conduct and propriety. At the same time, this 'closeness' fosters social activity and interaction, often placing value upon the individual and providing the teacher with a real sense of belonging and worth.

The space that the new teacher forges in the rural/remote place affects the quality of their teaching and learning practices. This has particular resonance for the teacher new to the town with no prior experience of rural/remote living. This is exacerbated further in that many new teachers to rural/remote schools are from the eastern cities and are often metro-centric in both training and philosophy. Preservice and induction programs could be enhanced if they took up and engaged more substantively with these important issues.

The situated nature of teaching and learning practices within schools and communities has particular resonance in the rural setting. School-community dynamics require both a broad and focused understanding in order to inform rural education policy and practice.

In Conclusion: Rural Schooling and Social Justice

This paper is based upon the assumption that *all* students deserve a quality education. Rural students should not be denied this simply because they are regarded as being "too different" or the place that they live in as "too difficult." Nor should we think that there are *no* significant differences in rural places and spaces. Further, we know that quality teachers are pivotal to realising socially just

schooling (Lingard, Mills & Hayes, 2000). Opportunities and challenges abound for rural education in relation to issues of cultural diversity and social justice. Though often caricatured as lacking cultural and social difference, to varying degrees, rural and remote communities are quite diverse (HREOC, 2000). In light of this, schools, and the communities that they are embedded in, can engage with and foreground the importance of issues of difference. As Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie (2003) note,

Making hope practical in schools means mediating the pressures of the global within the specificities of the local for the purposes of academic and social learning for all. This requires opening up opportunities for *all* young people through schooling, but especially for those disadvantaged by poverty, marginalised by difference and surrounded by violence (p. 2)

- some of whom are undoubtedly rural and remote students. Identifying how recognition of difference can constitute situated and engaging curricular and pedagogical possibilities will not only strengthen our rural and remote schools, it will strengthen our rural and remote communities.

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Diagram 1: Situated Practices

