

Re-thinking teacher stress and satisfaction as an issue of place¹

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This paper begins to suggest some ways of thinking about teacher stress and satisfaction as influenced by place. In this case the place being considered is the rural place and is viewed as being qualitatively different from other places. It is argued that stress, satisfaction, and professional identity are related to place and professional and pedagogical standards in an ever changing intertwined relationship. In this circular relationship a teachers' professional identity is influenced by their levels of stress and satisfaction which in turn is impacted upon by their ability to teach in a way they imagine to be quality teaching. The mediating factors within their view of quality teaching are embodied in professional standards while their pedagogy is embodied in models of pedagogy. However in rural places the imagined pedagogy and the lived experiences of newly appointed teachers often do not accord as the standards tend to privilege the metro-centric spaces in which they were conceived. The resultant miss-match heightens teacher stress, undermines their professional identity and reduces their overall satisfaction. Ironically the promotion of standards has been justified as a way of providing equity for all areas; however in reality they diminish and ignores place while controlling space.

Stress results when a person's ability to perform their job as imagined is diminished, in this case by having been taught to value metro-centric models of pedagogy which their teaching context undermines. Furthermore stress is a personal reaction to their lived experiences and the ability to control their own lives or live in accordance with what they value, a value which is often challenged for teachers who are experiencing living in a rural community for the first time. Their personal emotional response to this new context and the often rising disjuncture between this and their imaged comfortable place develops uncertainty and dissatisfaction undermining their ability to teach well. When a place does not accord to what they are used to or a negative image has been constructed it leads to higher stress. Thus stress and professional identity can be seen as a function of the match or mismatch between standards and / or their perception of a place when they get there. Recognising the dynamic between these factors is the first step in positioning teacher satisfaction as tool for attraction and retention to rural and remote communities. In this paper a few ideas will be explored which may help unlock this relationship.

Stress

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Work related stress is a major inhibitor of personal and organisational effectiveness throughout the economy. It is however an often overlooked factor which is all too often blamed on individual weaknesses rather than a systemic failing of the organisation in which the individual works. This appears to be a social construction of weakness as most definitions of work related stress highlight the relationship between the individual and their work. For example the Work Foundation suggests that 'Work-related stress occurs when there is a mismatch between the demands of the job and the resources and capabilities of the individual worker to meet those demands' (Blaug, Kenyon, & Lekhi, 2007, p. 4) while the United Kingdom Health and Safety Executive (2008) states that 'Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them' (Heath and Safety Executive, 2007).

While this is an economy wide problem with half a million people in the UK reporting work related stress at a level that is making them ill, 15% believing their job is extremely stressful, approximately 12.8 million working days lost (Blaug et al., 2007) at a cost of 3.8 Billion pounds a year (Heath and Safety Executive, 2007) there appears to be an even more acute problem in the education sector. Anywhere between 10-20% of teachers are suffering distress with 9% suffering severe psychological distress (Louden, 1987) up to 55% of teachers experienced a range of stress related behaviour such as anxiety, powerlessness and irritability at home (Independent Education Union, 1996). In NSW more than 800 compensation claims are made a year by teachers for stress related injuries (Patty, 2007) with working days lost for stress varying between 85 839 and 12 848 between 2003-2006 (Patty, 2007). While in Victoria approximately 20 000 teaching days were lost and \$5 million dollars was spent on stress related claims between June 2002 and October 2005 (Tomazin, 2005). This is all money not spent on education and teaching days lost and may contribute to the lack of program continuity due to teacher turnover being one the highest professional disincentives to retention for rural school teachers identified by Roberts (Roberts, 2005). Conceivably as the stress experienced by their colleagues encourages them to leave or be ill, others are also encouraged to do the same and the problem compounds as is shown by the high teacher separation and transfer rate of rural, remote and isolated communities (fig 1). There is however no separate figures for separation leaving only speculation about the cause of separation and the influence of place based stress upon it, even though anecdotally this appears to be a reasonably significant factor.

Work related stress in schools is a major illness in education in Australia resulting in poor education for some students. Research in Australia has continued to indicate that the effectiveness of staff in schools can be limited by workplace stress. It has been found that approximately 50% of teacher illness is in fact work related stress, twice the workforce average (Heath and Safety Executive, 2007). According to a recent Seek survey educators were the most likely to have left their job because they were not achieving work-life balance (26%) and even more (29%) resigned due to stress, higher than any other sector (Seek, 2007). It is

too common for educators to cite high workloads as having a negative impact on their well being and their relationships with their families (Bubb & Early, 2004). While workload is not the focus of this paper its perception coupled with the finding that teachers found they had little control and ownership over their work negatively effected their sense of professional trust (Bubb & Early, 2004) and highlights the importance of control over work in teacher satisfaction.

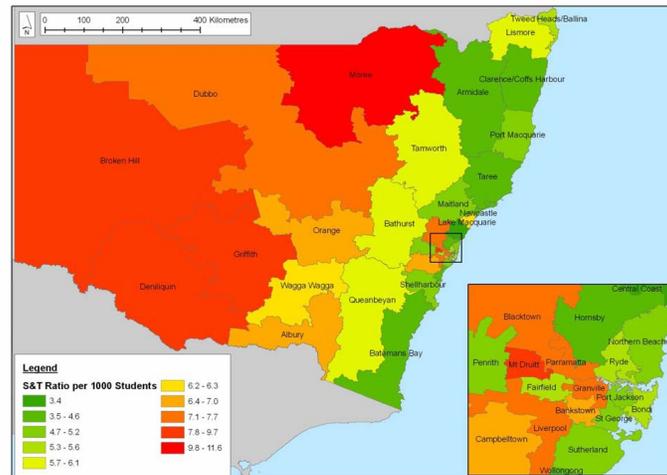


Figure 1:Ratio of Separations and Transfers Out per 1000 Students in 2005 by School Districtⁱ

Similarly research undertaken by the Australian Secondary Principals' Association has shown longitudinally consistently high levels of Principal stress with nearly half the principals surveyed suffering health problems related to their work (Australian Secondary Principals Association, 2004). This is supported by Victorian Government research in 2004 which found that almost 50% of principals had a diagnosed work-related health disorder and that 80% of principals reported high levels of stress (Victoria Department of Education & Training, 2004). It should be noted though that paradoxically 90% said their job also gave them great satisfaction (Victoria Department of Education & Training, 2004). A similar paradox is shown by New Zealand Research showed that 40% of principals regarded their stress levels as high or extremely high, while 49% agreed their job gave them great satisfaction (Hodgen & Wylie, 2005). The relevance here is that while both leadership and teaching staff enjoy their positions they also acknowledge high levels of stress, which can only exert a negative influence on their ability to perform their job to maximum potential and their overall satisfaction.

There has to date been no systemic approach adopted by employers to manage these circumstances. The absence of systemic approaches to alleviating or mitigating stress factors is a significant concern with the resulting sick leave and personal impact having a significant impact on the continuity and quality of education received by Australian students. There is clearly therefore a need to address this issue and the

work related factors which impact upon it. As research by the Australian Secondary Principals Association found, of the top 15 identified stressors to principals at least 10 are either imposed or directly influenced by state bureaucratic mechanisms (Australian Secondary Principals Association, 2004). Similarly the factors found by Howard & Johnson that can make a difference to teachers working lives can be learnt and that those opportunities for learning are easily within the power of individual schools, education bureaucracies and teacher education faculties to provide (Howard & Johnson, 2002). Thus their solution is directly in the hands of employers.

A Standards approach.

To help reduce the growth of work related stress in the United Kingdom the Heath and Safety Executive developed a management standards approach. These standards aim to reduce the number of employees who go off sick due to work related illness by helping to identify the main risks and providing a benchmark of good practice (Heath and Safety Executive). Based on an extensive study of the available research the standards (fig 2) cover six key areas of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health, and well-being, lower productivity and increased sickness absence (Heath and Safety Executive, 2007). Such an approach appears to be unique in its specific relationship to work place stress as distinct from general occupational health and safety.

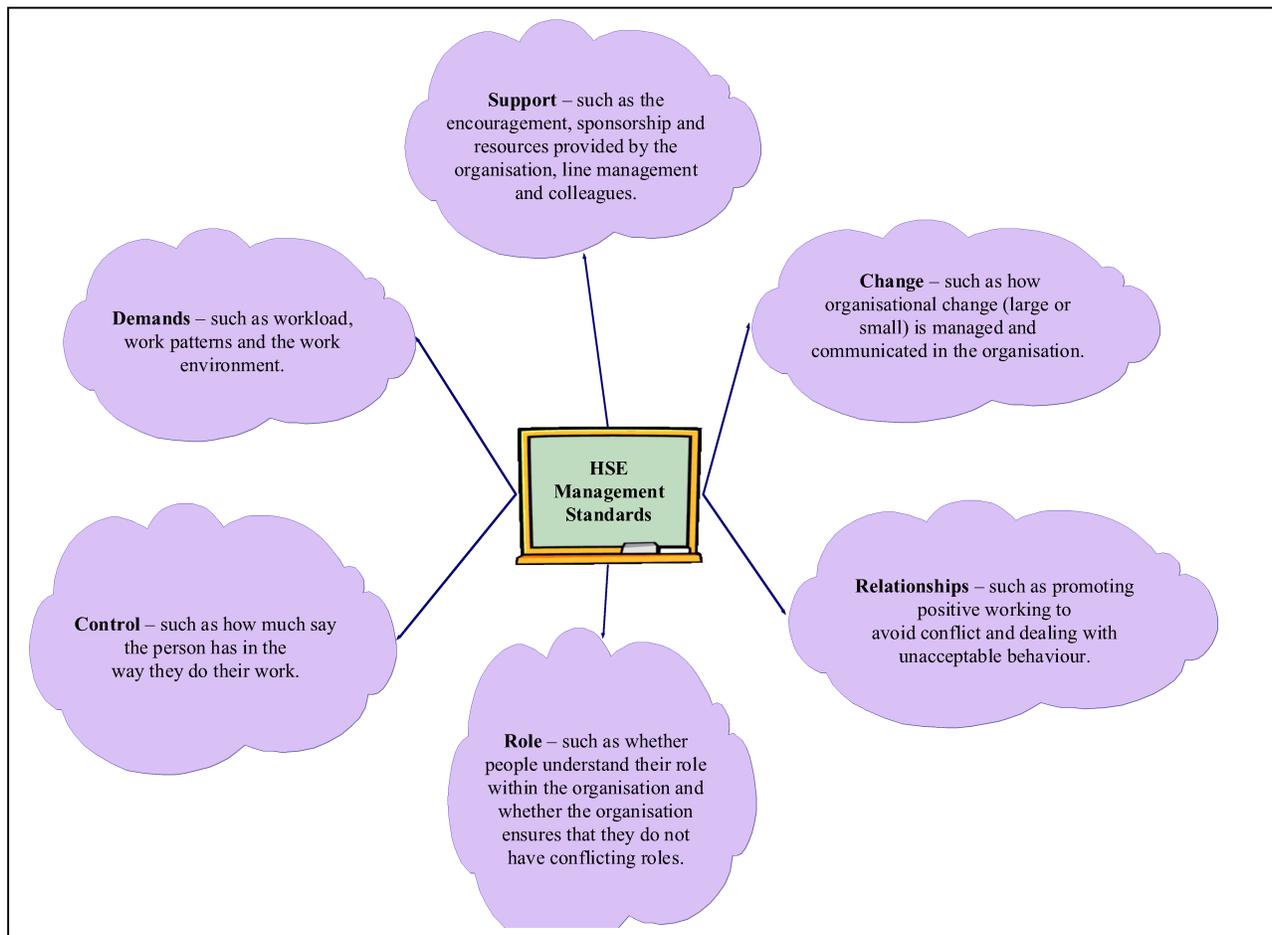


Figure 2: UK Health & Safety Executive Management Standards for Work-related stress.

These management standards provide an excellent benchmark for this research as they identify a number of broad areas which contribute to workplace stress. These standards and the standards approach have also been shown to be applicable in the education sector through a pilot project in UK schools (Heath and Safety Executive, 2007). However they do not suggest solutions to the problem other than meeting the benchmarks which are inherently descriptive. Meeting these benchmarks can be achieved through the policies and practices of employers and systems, and it will be suggested, through recognition of how different places influence teachers' relationships with these standards.

Teacher life phases and effectiveness

Research by Day et al has shown that teachers go through a range of different life phases (Fig 3), all of which impact differently upon their effectiveness (Day, Stobart et al., 2006). Importantly the research shows that effectiveness is not simply a factor of age or experience but is instead mediated by these life phases. Teacher identity therefore has different manifestations throughout a person's career and as such

differing views of it are needed for these career phases, something which professional standards and pedagogical models fail to recognise.

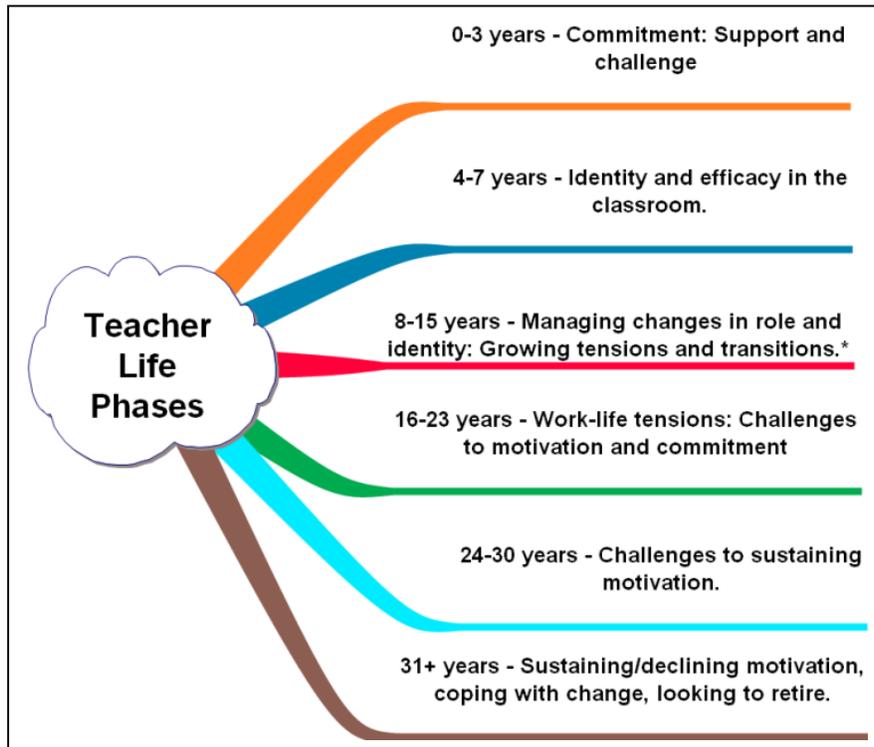


Figure 3: Teacher life phases (Day, Stobart et al., 2006)

According to this research effectiveness is a complex idea that is understood in relation to teachers perceptions and how these vary over time and different school and personal contexts. Importantly for this paper effectiveness is in turn influenced by the teachers sense of professional identity which is affected positively or negatively by different degrees of tension experienced between their own educational ideals and aspirations, personal experiences and a range of work factors (Day, Stobart et al., 2006). As such 'Effectiveness' needs to be understood in relation to teachers' perceptions and how these vary over time in different institutional and personal contexts and that teachers' capacities to be effective are influenced by variations in their work, lives and identities. The important question here is what role does teachers perceptions of place influence this professional identity, especially when the benchmarks for measuring this are designed in a metro-centric form of professionalism.

Standards

In recent educational discourse the concept of equity has become intertwined in the public and political discourse with quality, and consequently the concept of 'quality' has been redefined to ideas such as excellence, efficiency and standards. To feed this desire for quality and equity standards for the profession

and standards based models of pedagogy, have been developed to provide guidelines and benchmarks. Invariably these standards value a metro-centric curriculum and a metropolitan form of schooling and illustrates the hegemonic nature of the curriculum and the high cultural ground which it occupies. While they are conceived with a view to equity it is precisely this assumption that reinforces its place as part of the power structure and acts to undermine local knowledge's. In this vein the Codification of knowledge which occurs in pedagogy models or teaching standards excludes some knowledge, legitimises some, marginalises others, fails to embrace diversity, position some learners above others, is context free and overall reductionist.

Part of the justification for standards is explored by Sachs who discusses the differences between *teacher* and *teaching* standards. *Teacher* standards she argues are for the individual, measuring teacher performance, regulatory and see teachers as the object of measurement; *Teaching* standards are however for the profession, focuses on pedagogy, for improving teaching, developmental, and see teaching as a process that can be improved (Sachs, 2003, 2005, 2007). However neither conception interrogates what teacher and what type of teaching are being valued. Regardless of the answer, as a benchmark for professionalism they provide teachers with a sanctioned image of what type of pedagogy and professional behaviours are valued. Clearly then if they are not matched with school context they would undermine a teachers sense of self and their professional self concept, causing stress and dissatisfaction. This cultural disconnection caused by a lack of knowledge of place and no preparation in appreciating it in education conceivably influences teacher dissatisfaction; which in turn influences the failure to accept a position in a rural school or encourages the teacher to leave after a short period of time.

Places

Reference to both place and space is becoming popular in the academic literature, particularly in relation to rural education. However as Gulson and Symes (2007) point out 'space' and 'place' as a constitutive categories are under researched and under theorised in education. While both are related factors place has a more local based conception whereas space remains a broader complex and multifaceted concept. However as the local is the topic here only place will be referred to and where space is used it is used to describe the generalisation of place.

Within the rural education literature this view of place is seen as a vehicle to recognise the inherent value of each place and overcome the perceptions of isolation and disadvantage by recognising and celebrating the positives of each location. As such this place often appears to refer to the physical location or characteristics of the physical environment, with place being synonymous with a form of relevance or connectedness or an awareness of the local historical, social and economic conditions (Wallace & Boylan,

2007). This then refocuses the curriculum and pedagogy upon a relevance to the environment in which the education occurs (Gruenewald, 2003). While this is seen as an important component of student engagement in many models of pedagogy and should certainly be a factor in any new conceptions of social justice in education (Roberts, 2008) it remains essentially a limiting definition which exists in relation to a geographically defined location. Any conception of place needs to consider the way in which that place is conceived by those living at it and those to who it is new, as their perceptions are influenced by what they have heard and been told. This conception of place verges on ideas of space but differs as it is focussed upon the interpretation of the location.

Considering an understanding of how an individuals perceptions influence their construction of place and space is advanced by the ideas of theorists such as Lefebvre (1974) and Soja (1996) who talk about a trialectic of space. According to Lefebvre this trialectic consists of; Perceived space – the patterned routines of material and social practice; conceived space – ideological, symbolic and representational practices and; Lived space – the everyday (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996). In many ways the dominant views of place in the rural education literature appear to grow out of lived space. However it is the contradictions in and between perceived and conceived space that may have a big influence on teacher efficacy and identity. When lived space is the centre of views of place and a ‘rural lens’ (Wallace & Boylan, 2007) applied to see things from that perspective education is framed to look at the positives of physical locations. However, they do not take into account the previous experiences or cultural messages prospective teachers have received and believe about these places and which influence the way they subsequently perceive them.

Place, Perceptions and Standards

The tensions between broader social conditions in which teachers live and work and their professional roles impacts upon their self identity (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006) which in turn is culturally embedded and intertwined with their personal identity (Day & Kington, 2008). Therefore a personal response to place and professional role, as embodied in standards, cannot be adequately separated and where a conflict exists between lived places, perceptions of places and standards, the inevitable result is conceivably stress, a reduction in satisfaction and consequently lower levels of effectiveness. As place is an emerging dimension of identity (Kerkham, 2007) it is important to broaden its meaning to include more than the previously recognised situational factors on identity of schools context, internal culture and environment (Day & Kington, 2008; Day, Stobart et al., 2006). A definition such as that proffered by Kerkham of place as the participation in representations of *place* that influences how teachers see themselves and understand how they belong (Kerkham, 2007) may be more helpful. It allows recognition that the type of teacher they hope to be influences their identity and that knowledge of self is critical in

how teachers construct and perform their work (Day, Stobart et al., 2006). This accords with Ball's view that situated factors of identity related to within school factors change, however conflicts with his assertion that personal identity is stable (1972 in Day, Stobart et al., 2006). Instead it is suggested that perceptions of place impact equally upon all components of identity and that place is itself a dimension of identity.

When the benign place manifests itself as fear it can dissuade someone from accepting a teaching position there, or conflict with the ideas they have of a successful teacher identity (McConaghy, 2006; McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004). This idea, expressed by Said (1999) as being 'out of place' can manifest itself in the teacher being unable to connect between the culture and physical environment they are used to and the one they now find themselves in, and as such magnifies any mismatch, which it is suggested heightens dissatisfaction. This is partly influenced by the way places can be 'real and imagined' (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996) as seen in the Australian context where there is a mythology of the centrality of rural areas in the national image while they practically play little part. Similarly there is often constructed in the popular imagination an idea of distance as being isolating or as many rural towns as being dangerous places. While McConaghy & Bloomfield (2004) have explored how this mythology creates fear and influences teachers decisions to accept positions it is suggested that it can also influence the retention of teachers as they battle to reconcile their learned perceptions with their lived reality.

In this way a teachers identity is influenced by their ability to perform their role as they see it, how they handle the tensions between their own expectations and that of external agencies (Day, Stobart et al., 2006), and their understanding of place as embodied in the complicated relations between identity, place and pedagogy (Kerckham, 2007). The result of this internal conflict will be seen in how they enact their teaching, as either a pedagogy based on fear and a need to control and overcome that fear or as an immersion and acceptance of place. This view is however mediated by views of what good teaching and professional behaviour is as embodied in metro-centric teaching standards and models of pedagogy which continue to remind teachers of the mismatch between the two. Similarly centralist reform agenda's potential to destabilize beliefs and practices and consequently identity (Day, Stobart et al., 2006) further contribute to dissatisfaction and stress.

The metro-centric nature of standards and their role as a medium of power and control is obscured by their suggested use as a means to ensure equity across regions (Green & Letts, 2007) through the provision of uniform education across large geographical distances. This has reinforced the illusion that standards, of professionalism, pedagogy or curriculum, are context free and therefore apply equally to all locations. Consequently Australian education remains geographically blind and that space has been neutralised as an

educational consideration resulting in a tendency to treat every place as the same (Green & Letts, 2007). The resultant standards based curriculum enforced by assessment standards ensures that the local is actively marginalised and devalued (Bryden & Boylan, 2004). The emerging recognition of place is beginning to challenge this conception in relation to the curriculum by focussing on the local environment; however it also needs to challenge it in relation to the dominant views of pedagogy and professionalism as it is through comparison to these that teachers judge their professional identities. This relationship has been attempted to be represented in figure 4.

Teaching then exists in a real or imagined place (Soja, 1996) depending upon how the teacher perceives the place they are in (McConaghy, 2006; McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004) and the phase of their career in which they are in (Day, Stobart et al., 2006). As these are all relative concepts their inability to recognise differences in place can be counter to the view of effectiveness used by Day et al (2006) of teachers perceptions based on their aspirations and lead to stress as they feel they do not have the skills to perform their role in this environment. Contradictions and tensions also arise when a teachers view of their role and that of external standards they are supposed to adhere to do not match (Nias 1989 in Day, Stobart et al., 2006). This becomes a question of both teacher training and placement as when considered in relation to life phases many teachers are placed in a socially and professionally different context at just the time that they are developing their professional identity. This would conceivably heighten the perceived mismatch between the valued pedagogy and curriculum and their lived experience. Further skills will be also needed here to incorporate place, as the literature is arguing, into their pedagogy while they are also struggling with their own challenged professional and personal identity. Similarly the converse response of placing teachers through an exchange type scheme later in their careers when they have a strong sense of identity and are seeking a challenge may actually be more counter productive. Teachers in the later phase of their career may have a strong sense of professional identity, however it is founded upon a particular relationship with the pedagogy and the curriculum, which will conceivably see them reinforcing a metro-centric model instead of the emerging place based pedagogy.

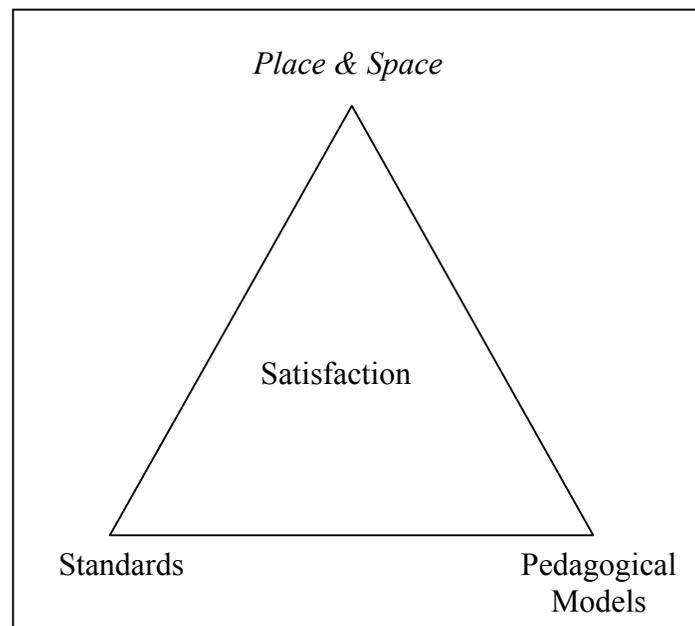


Figure 4: The Triangle of Satisfaction.

The ongoing tension between which groups have the power and position to influence which knowledge will be valued and codified in standards results in some places and place based knowledge being marginalised. The failure to include this knowledge then results in an inequity as groups in this place do not possess the knowledge to be judged successful against the resultant standards of another place. Such an inequity is therefore artificial as it is created by a failure to include or recognise rather than a pre-existing deficiency. The importance of organised knowledge, and the power of identified groups to have a stake in its production are suggested by Connell to be a key reason why equity programs have never been big enough to have real redistributive effects (Connell, 1993). These empowered groups have shaped the school system to their needs through the routine functioning of the institution (Connell, 1993; Teese, 2000; Yeatman, 1998; Young, 1990) and consequently developed a metro-centric knowledge base that excludes a range of local knowledge's (Christie, 2005). Changing this situation is important because as Connell points out the vast majority of sociologists recognise the importance of the cultural match between school and home (Connell, 1993). While Aboriginal perspectives, multicultural, and gender have successfully been included there has not been a concurrent recognition of the rural perspective, aside from its reproduction in national mythology. Schools in remote Aboriginal communities have been able to reconfigure their curriculum, presumably because they work with a sanctioned group of difference, whereas general rural schools are still

forced to focus upon a centralised curriculum. In countering this it has been argued that country communities want their children to receive the same curriculum as their metropolitan counterparts as it is regarded as more rigorous and a more accepted form of knowledge (McKenzie, Harrold, & Sturman, 1996). Others deliberately bypass the local rural school in favour of a city based boarding education out of concerns for rigour. This reinforces that like knowledge in the work of Connell (1993) and Teese (2000) this place is not dominant in constructions of standards and perceptions of quality.

The staffs in the schools negotiate this contested terrain daily as they attempt to value the local and the standards. How successful they are in doing this is related to them having the requisite skills and inevitably influences their perceptions of effectiveness as illustrated in figure 5. As Day, Stobart et al (2006) point out teacher's professional identities comprises the interactions between professional, situated and personal dimensions. However these also reflect the social and policy expectations of what a good teacher is and the educational ideals of the teacher. When it is considered that teacher effectiveness is relational to their perceptions of themselves (Day, Stobart et al., 2006) it needs to be considered if we are setting them up for failure with the models we use and thus underling the potential of education for these communities. Thus the role of place is crucial as a Day, Stobart et al (2006) observed that school context often influenced a teacher's ability to sustain commitment and in turn be effective. Alternatively context and environment can influence stress (Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council, 2004) however rather than understand it the solution is usually proposed as the 'removing yourself from a particular context or environment' (Australian Principals Associations Professional Development Council, 2004, p. 13). However as Howard & Johnson (2002) found teachers sources of coping with stress in difficult to staff and disadvantaged schools are external to the individual and included 'A sense of agency, a strong support group, pride in achievements and competence in areas of personal importance are all major protective factors and were all strong features' (Howard & Johnson, 2002, p. 19). All of which can be provided by employers through appropriate place based policies and an approach similar to the Heath and Safety Executive.

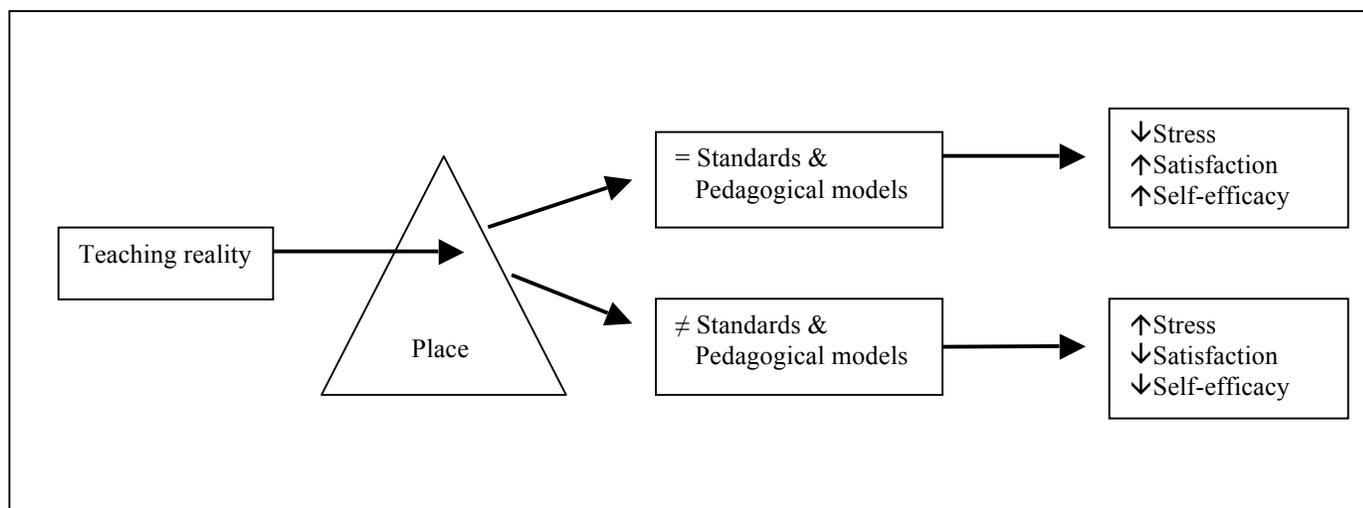


Figure 5: place in satisfaction.

The need to incorporate local knowledge to overcome the mismatch between standards and place is shown through the positive side of teacher satisfaction as demonstrated in studies of long staying rural teachers (Boylan & McSwan, 1998) which indicates that what causes an adverse reaction in some teachers is positive for others. This raises the specter of personal place based responses in helping to promote teacher satisfaction, something that is clearly possible when the majority of stressors are within the control of employers. To overcome this the application of a place based Health and Safety Executive like standards approach is not only attractive but overdue. Such an approach would not be contradictory to the criticism of standards per se and their role in creating the problem as these ‘standards’ only indicate areas and are not a sub set of smaller standards or elements that are to be observed. They would allow a discussion to occur using a common language in a way that recognises that relate differently with standards in different places.

When considered in light of the research by Day, Stobart et al (2006), data from the author’s earlier study (Roberts, 2005) and evolving place theory a view of stress and satisfaction as place and career stage dependant emerges. This recognises that teacher identity is formed both through their lived experience and their expectations as embodied in standards. Recognition of such influences is an important first step in developing policy to mitigate its influence, and thus enhance the quality of education received by students by ensuring happy and supported staff that are attracted to and retained in rural, remote and isolated communities. As part of this teachers need to be prepared and trained about how to recognise and engage with difference, as well as taught a

range of strategies to understand and examine their own deeply held perceptions. Recognising and working with differences will help them feel confident in new settings and open to new ideas and places as well as addressing the particular needs of students in their context.

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