

# Rural vs the city

SKILLING, ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TEACHERS IN RURAL, REGIONAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS IS AN ONGOING CHALLENGE FACED BY MANY AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES. AS DR PHILIP ROBERTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA EXPLAINS, IN ORDER TO OVERCOME THIS ISSUE, WE MUST FIRST CHANGE OUR PRECONCEIVED IDEAS.



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We seem to have an enduring problem in Australian education – an inability to imagine anything outside of the city as valuable. Perhaps we should keep it a secret, but rural schools are hotbeds of innovation as they continually work to turn challenges into opportunities. They are also training grounds for many new teachers who start their career in these schools.

The recent independent review into regional, rural and remote education, led by Professor John Halsey, notes that attracting and retaining appropriate teachers in rural, regional and remote schools remains one of the most pressing challenges on the Australian education agenda. It was also noted as such by the 2000 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Enquiry, and even mentioned as a key challenge by the NSW parliament in 1904. Sadly, progress towards a more equitable educational experience, outcomes from schooling and access to post secondary education, has been slow.

The release of the report of the independent review into rural, regional and remote education does however provide a much-needed focus on the unique challenges and opportunities rural, regional and remote communities encounter. Ultimately, this is an issue of the place or rural, regional and remote communities in contemporary Australian society.

Indeed it is a justice issue par excellence – in terms of social and educational outcomes, and how we value people, places and communities.

Rural places are not homogenous – each place is distinct given its particular geographic context, population composition and economic base. Learning to read these ‘contexts’ is a distinct professional skill. Connecting these contexts to the existing curriculum, to make it meaningful to students, takes even greater professional skill. To do that in multi-age classrooms, with students spread across five schools and linked via video or with fewer staff – well, that takes it to another level again.

Problematically, the current professional architecture doesn’t capture this complexity well. The focus on standards, models of pedagogy, and a standardised curriculum send a message that what matters transcends context. Nearly all teacher education degrees are now the same and almost all have lost older disciplines like sociology and philosophy – those that help people learn to read contexts and think about what they are doing, and why, rather than merely just doing it. To be clear this shouldn’t be read as a critique of professionalism, instead it is a call to reclaim that professionalism. The social circumstance in which we live, not the



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individual teacher, impose the limits of professional practice. Implicated here is how we value and engage with rural difference, and how we prepare teachers for these contexts.

It's much harder to measure and judge the qualities of things that are context dependent and situated, but that really just says our evaluation tools are pretty blunt. That standards and pedagogy models are validated in rural contexts post development doesn't address issues of confirmation bias. Rather than try to understand what effective teaching looks like in 'this rural school', teachers and schools are often subtly told to be less rural by comparing their practices to non-rural schools. Professionals are able to balance context with standards and interpret 'know(ing) students and how they learn' and 'know(ing) the content and how to teach it' as contextually dependent.

The evidence that after 10 years NAPLAN has not changed the educational landscape, suggests all the policy rhetoric of this era has had little success. Thinking of new approaches is not something we are particularly good at though. Thankfully history has some lessons for us.

Over the last decade there has been much attention given to preparing teachers for rural schools in their pre-service teacher preparation, with the aim being to help them better transition to positions in rural schools. This includes at least four large-scale federally funded research projects. In all this work there has also been a big focus on understating the unique characteristics of rural school leadership, and for preparing rural school leaders. However, a scan of university courses show only a handful offer anything aimed at preparing teachers for rural schools, and they are all elective units. It seems the research done by those committed to this cause has made little impact on the standardisation agenda. Surely we can do better than this?

Many of the approaches to overcome the staffing challenges of rural schools have focussed upon incentives to attract and retain teachers, professional development and pre-service preparation in understating how rural schools are different to metropolitan schools, mentoring programs, and accessing professional development. There has been a move away from incentives though – as while they get

teachers to these schools they also encourage them to leave.

If we want teachers to stay we need to change the way we talk about rural places, and help these communities to grow. Indeed, many of the key elements of any answers to the question of rural school achievement exist in the public policy environment, and the place of rural Australia in contemporary Australian society. Unfortunately, rural communities are just not all that attractive places for many teachers to relocate to. When they do, it is often only a stopover on their way to what is regarded as a professionally desirable spot in a big city.

Meeting the unique needs of the community is only possible if there are appropriate teachers in the schools to do so. It is not surprising then that the challenges of staffing are a major theme. Many approaches have been tried throughout Australia to train, attract and retain appropriate teachers for rural, regional and remote communities. If we are going to ensure the equitable distribution of skilled teachers in these schools it is time to try something radically different. Now that's a debate worth having.



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