EXTENDING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR (RURAL) TEACHER EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

This paper, and its position within this special issue, seeks to contribute to the growing discussion and debates about the importance of adding the 'rural' to all matters 'education'. Advocating that indeed rurality is everybody's business, not just for those who live in rural places. The central argument of 'adding the rural' is that in its absence, 'a metro-urban normative approach' (Green, 2013) remains the dominant position thereby marginalising and silencing those who live beyond the city. In this paper I seek to contribute further to the debate and explore the notion of 'adding the rural' to teacher educators' knowledge base and their professional learning. I thus examine the 'good theoretical tools' (Corbett, 2016) that *all* teacher educators might need to equip themselves with, in order to be inclusive of rural students' needs. To think through this question I revisit and draw from the growing rural education literature and recent rural studies, identifying three emerging themes: Namely 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992); 'rural social space' (Reid, Green, Cooper, Hastings, Lock, & White, 2010) and 'place consciousness' (Gruenewald, 2003). These three unfold as key theoretical tools, for all teacher educators to utilise. The themes offer a form of 'trialectical thinking' (Corbett, 2016) for teacher educators, opening new spaces to explore the preparation of teachers. The triad is consistent with the notion of 'third or hybrid spaces' (Zeichner, 2010) which can move us away from unhelpful rural-urban binaries and towards a more activist, generative and transformative response for teacher education and the broader rural education research community to consider.

Key words: teacher educator, rural education, rural social space, place consciousness

INTRODUCTION

For Australia, like many other international contexts, the further away from a metropolitan city the school is located, the harder it is to recruit, retain and support quality teachers. As Kenny, Harreveld and Danaher (2016) most recently note from their international rural education literature search conducted across a diverse geographical spread of contexts. *The distinctive affordances and challenges of teaching in rural environments are a recurring theme* (p. 180). In this paper I examine the role teacher educators can play to address this ongoing issue and support future teachers to have productive (rural) careers. I draw from a particular teacher educator knowledge domain framework (see Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013) and the data and findings drawn from across the rural (teacher) education literature and studies. Themes that emerge includes an understanding of community 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992); 'rural social space' (Reid et al., 2010) and 'place consciousness' (Gruenewald, 2003). These three themes offer a theoretical framework to support the knowledge base required of teacher educators. I also argue that

taking a rural standpoint (see Green & Reid, 2014; Roberts, 2014) is an inclusive way for all teacher educators, no matter where they are geographically located, to address social justice and inequity and improve the learning for *all* students. Before exploring these points further, it is important to take a step back and spend some time considering the research to date on teacher educators as a professional group within academia, to then be able to consider further 'adding the rural' to their professional learning needs.

TEACHER EDUCATORS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

While understanding the identity and career trajectory of teacher educators is still a relatively new research field (Murray & Male 2005; van der Klink & Swennan, 2009; Boyd, Harris, & Murray, 2011); the role, work and professional learning of teacher educators is increasingly under closer scrutiny by policy makers and politicians (see for example European Commission, 2013). The primary reason for this scrutiny within a neo-liberal agenda is as a greater focus on the importance of teachers' impact on student learning emerges, so too does the focus on those who prepare the teachers: the teacher educators. As Cochran-Smith (2003) describes, teacher educators are viewed as 'linchpins' in education policy and thus central to education reforms.

Teacher educator studies (for example, Murray & Male, 2005) however have shown that there is little in the way of induction, preparation or professional development for teacher educators in this unique role. This is particularly true in the Australian context (see Mayer, Mitchell, Santoro, & White, 2011), with many teacher educators naming their career trajectory as 'accidental' and with little to no induction or professional learning into the role and work: *entering the teacher education profession often appears to be a phenomenon of chance* (p. 252). Stories from participants in the study by Mayer and colleagues (2011) highlighted that the majority of teacher educators 'stumble' into teacher education, mostly coming from teaching backgrounds. They viewed themselves as employed not so much as a 'teacher educator' but as a maths lecturer or science lecturer for example. Across the international literature, the majority who come into the field of teacher education do not readily identify themselves as 'teacher educators' (Kosnik, et.al, 2011) but rather by their discipline. Identifying with content knowledge only, means that those who take this view, are not fully appreciating the wider contribution their work might have to student learning. As Zeichner (2014) critiques, some in teacher education appear to be more focused on 'their content', rather than on preparing future teachers for the underserved communities in which they might teach. In the United States context these are likely to be low socio-economic 'urban' communities serving largely Latino and African-American populations while in the Australian context these underserved communities tend to be low socio-economic 'rural' communities. Findings from the Australian Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) project (White & Kline, 2012) support this view highlighting that many teacher educators revealed little understanding of the needs of the rural communities where their graduates might teach.

The RRRTEC study (see White, Kline, Hastings, & Lock, 2012; White & Kline, 2012) used semi-structured interviews to teacher educators seeking responses to questions such as:

- What do you think are the distinctive features of preparing a student teacher for a rural career?
- Where in your teacher education course (if any) do you believe rural curriculum should be embedded?
- What would you see as key or essential content to learn about if you knew your student teacher were to take a rural teaching position?
- What are the professional learning needs of teacher educators to deliver a rural teacher education curriculum?

Findings revealed few teacher educators felt able to respond to any of the questions. The study exposed a group of teacher educators who described themselves with no rural experience or knowledge base from which to draw from and who expressed themselves as ill-equipped to teach

future rural teachers. The silences in the responses suggest significant implications for the ongoing issue of staffing rural schools and highlights that teacher educators need a better understanding of rural communities. The RRRTEC project provided a set of resources (www.rrrtec.net.au) intended for teacher educators to use and embed in their teaching and to address this gap in knowledge. Unfortunately the RRRTEC work to date has not yet been embraced by all metropolitan campuses with evidence of some initial teacher education providers using the materials, mostly those in regional campuses, or within specialised units/courses. While there is some progress with this shift there is still much work to be done to have all teacher education providers embed materials and importantly generate their own, across core curriculum units.

One of the reasons for the lack of mainstream use of the RRRTEC resources lies in the ways in which many teacher educators continue to see 'rurality' as outside their work and role. Some teacher educators continue to look at the website created as a tool designed for their pre-service teachers but not for them, although the website specifically states:

> *This resource is designed for all teacher educators.*
>
> *It has been developed to support teacher educators to prepare future graduates for the challenges and opportunities of teaching in rural/regional communities.*
>
> *The materials can be readily embedded into lectures, tutorials, workshops and professional learning experiences to provide teaching and learning environments that comprehensively consider the needs of rural and regional students, their families, schools and communities.*
>
> *The website can be navigated in various ways to suit individual teacher educators' needs. Underpinning the curriculum module design is a conceptual framework and links to key readings in rural teacher education and other related fields. To find out more about using this website, click on the tab 'How to use this site'.*
>
> *Our aim is to inspire all teacher educators to produce quality teachers for regional and rural Australia* (www.rrrtec.net.au homepage).

As Goodwin and Kosnik (2013) note, *It goes without saying that teacher educators cannot teach what they do not know* (p. 334). There is clearly a need for a knowledge base to inform (rural) teacher educators' professional learning as they are key in preparing our future (rural) teachers. As Banks 2008, (as cited by Goodwin and Kosnik, 2013) describe:

> *Undoubtedly, we need teachers who are diverse not just in how they look, where they come from, the language they speak, and the histories they embody, but in how they think, interact with Other(s), and embrace a world where citizenship is 'differentiated' and is not simply 'legal' or 'minimal', but 'active' and 'transformative'* (p341).

Cochran-Smith et al, (2009) claims that the most important goals of teacher education programs are; social responsibility, social change and social justice, and it is these goals that should frame our programs. In a similar vein, Nieto (2000) argues that equity needs to be placed at the forefront and centre of teacher education. If prospective teachers are to play a more transformative role in contesting inequitable schooling arrangements, they need to develop a knowledge and understanding of the moral and political purposes of education, the social context of schooling, and the relationships between social class, race and gender in the production of educational disadvantage (Lingard, 1994). As McInerney (2007) notes these issues:

> *…along with programs focusing on the needs and aspirations of Indigenous Australians and strategies to promote the development of critical literacies, should be placed at the centre of teacher education programs and not consigned to the periphery* (p. 267).

With this picture in mind I now turn to the theoretical knowledge base that might best support and enrich the professional learning of teacher educators. As Corbett (2016, p. 150) reminds us

good rural teachers and teacher educators require good theoretical tools. So what are the theoretical tools for 'good rural teacher educators and; why does 'adding the rural' really matter?

RURALITY AND TAKING A RURAL STANDPOINT

Rurality I argue is *every* teacher educators' business, not just those who are geographically located in rural locations. I make this claim, building from the work of Bill Green (2013) who posed the questions of *why add the rural?* And, *what does the adjective 'rural' do?* (p.17). Green (2013) explained that if we do not consider the notions of 'rurality' then it can become something of a blind spot and as a consequence positions rural students, their families and communities as 'invisible' (White & Kline, 2012; White & Corbett, 2014), just like the silences of the teacher educators as part of the RRRTEC study showed. It is important for *all* teacher educators to think *about*, *with* and *for* rural places and spaces. In this way the notion of rurality can be reframed to be one of inclusion where rurality becomes *a space of knowledge production or more simply of learning* (Corbett, 2016, p. 146) for teacher educators. As Kenny, Harreveld and Danaher (2016) explain in writing about the notion of adding 'rurality' (comparing Ireland and Australia), that:

> *…rurality offers a conceptually rich space to disturb, disrupt and dissemble teachers' and teacher educators' knowledgeable ignorance (Daniel, 1960: Firestein, 2012) of the Irish Travellers of Indigenous Australians, of refugees, of miners, of pastoralists, of the diversely different ways of being and becoming in rural communities.* (p. 196)

Adding the adjective 'rural' to teacher education and to the knowledge and theoretical base of teacher educators, serves to deliberately disturb and disrupt this 'knowledgeable ignorance' of teacher educators as described above and of the 'one size fits all approach' to teacher preparation that currently exists in most teacher education programs and which has seen by default a largely urban agenda (Atkin, 2003). Adding 'rural' to teacher educators' professional learning, also serves another purpose; it further defines our learning and provides a different perspective and standpoint. I use the term 'standpoint' drawing from the work of Roberts (2014) to mean:

> *…the intersection of a person's various positions, such as gender, class, ethnicity and rurality, and how these combine to influence how one might see the world. I also use the term drawing from the work of Sher and Sher (1994) who note a rural standpoint refers to approaching one's research and scholarship from a position that rural people and communities really matter, spatiality matters. This is important because it is inclusive and invites all teacher educators no matter where they might be physically located to take up the notion of becoming a rural teacher educator* (White, 2016, p. 40).

In this next section I discuss and compare the rural (teacher) education literature field to highlight the social and education inequalities still faced by rural students. I also discuss some of the ways in which rural communities have sought to work with teacher education in powerful and successful ways. My purpose in doing so is: to continue to name and make visible for teacher educators' knowledge and professional learning, the impact of the current lack of a rural standpoint in initial teacher education and; as a way to use these studies as a call out for greater action, urgency and agency for those researching and teaching in the field of teacher education. As Cuervo (2012) reminds us:

> *The failure to develop robust theories of social justice is reflected in the under-representation of the disadvantages faced by rural schools in teacher education programs. While the dimensions of disadvantage are sometimes acknowledged, the lack of a clear theoretical framework that enables pre-service and in-service teachers to make sense of patterns of rural disadvantage contributes to a perpetuation of the problem* (p.84).

RURAL INEQUALITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

While there is a growing and welcomed recognition of the need to prepare teachers to better understand student diversity in their classrooms, there is still too little focus on preparing teachers for the diversity of the places and communities in which these teachers might find themselves employed. The current Australian education policy move towards a nationally regulated and assessed initial teacher education accreditation process and away from the responsibilities of the different States and Territories, poses a particular risk to staffing diverse rural communities. Such centralised devices typically produce a 'metro' model and moves teacher education providers to further create a generic teacher education program that are urban by default in response to a set of prescribed standards rather than framed with rurality and 'place' diversity in mind. This is not a critique of standards as such, but more an attempt to highlight that within any standardised, centralised approach there needs to be an explicit focus on the importance of a diversity discourse acknowledging, recognising and valuing the differences not deficit, of places (Atkin, 2003).

'Place' clearly matters in the preparation of teachers (White & Kline, 2012) and indeed other professions. This is evidenced by a recent study (Lamb, Glover, & Walstab, 2014), highlighting that Australian rural school communities continue to suffer aspects of educational disadvantage including higher teacher turnover, low retention rates, less confidence in the benefits of education, limited cultural facilities in the community, lack of employment opportunities for school completers, and a less relevant curriculum. These issues combined continue to lead to lower levels of education attainment and less opportunity for Australian rural students to attend tertiary education evidenced by Pont, Figueroa, Zapata and Fraccola's report (2013) that notes:

> Rural and Indigenous students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, have lower [school] performance and completion rates across Australia. Students in rural schools perform 56 score points lower than students in Australian cities or large city schools. The Indigenous population, which represents up to 2.5% of the population, has a strong start in education: 95% of 4-14 year-olds participate in education, although they face low attainment rates, with 20% of Indigenous people 15 and over completing Year 12 or equivalent (p. 6).

These issues continue to impact more than one third of the population in Australia who live in-land and 'beyond the metropolis' (Needham & Dieterich-Ward, 2009) and as a result have fewer education opportunities than their city counterparts. Studies also show that the further away from a major capital city the school is located, the more likely it is harder to staff (Halsey, 2006; Roberts, 2004; White & Kline, 2012) which itself can contribute to lower levels of education attainment due to irregular staffing and the increased likelihood that teachers will teach 'outside their fields' (Hobbs, 2013). Australia's rural schools are still more likely to be staffed by inexperienced teachers who do not appear to stay long (Roberts, 2004, Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). A recent longitudinal study into the effectiveness of teacher education, for example, indicated on-going employment conditions were not as favourable for graduates with many on contract or placed in uncertain sessional or temporary positions making their own perceptions of effectiveness and preparedness less as a result (see the Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education (SETE) study, Mayer et al. 2014). These new graduate teachers 'go rural' typically seeking full-time employment in the beginning phases of their teaching career with some taking up financial incentives (as provided by some of the States and Territories) to do so, but without the appropriate induction and mentoring support required (Halsey 2006; Roberts, 2004; Mayer et al., 2014). Paradoxically these incentives can have a negative impact on student learning and contribute unwittingly to the staffing churn as they tend to foster a short-term solution to a long-term issue. These policies I urge need further investigation.

While acknowledging that this is not the case for all graduates, some reported beginning teachers in the SETE study noted their motivations for seeking a rural position were fuelled to secure a full-

time position with little preparation or understanding of the needs of rural students and the places in which they were then employed to work. Some of the stories echo those of Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, (2004) in their study of graduate teachers working in remote Indigenous schools:

> [Some teachers] were motivated by wanting to get extra points for 'country service' in a place which gave significant extra points, and the strong possibility of being hired in an 'easier', urban or coastal city school (p. 3).

This previous account and those of some graduates in the SETE project going into rural communities under prepared, continues to illustrate the way in which many teachers who take up positions in rural and remote schools around Australia see their appointments—as ticket to a 'better place', or as an encouragement of what has been called 'out-migration' (Corbett, 2007 as cited in Reid et al., 2010, p. 264). The SETE project cases (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015) also found some similarities to those by O'Brien, Goodard and Keeffe (2008) who found, burnout of these beginning teacher's continues as a common problem that *not only has a devastating influence on the personal lives of beginning teachers and their families but the associated attrition also negatively impinges on the entire teaching profession* (p. 13). This issue can have a profound effect on rural students who believe that their teachers do not care about them. As Reid et al. (2010) explain:

> There is a generalised expectation among many rural children and their families that teachers lack interest in their education. This viewpoint has developed from the typically rapid turnover of staff in many rural schools. When students believe that their teachers have never been interested in teaching in their town, they are likely to become disheartened, discouraged and uninterested in learning from them. The issue for the sustainability of their community, of course, is that, without the resources that education can provide, they will be unable to participate in and thereby support its continued health and success (p. 266).

Poor teacher retention trends in Australian rural schools continue to raise questions about the way teacher education programs currently prepare teachers for the realities of rural areas (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004; Roberts, 2004; White & Kline, 2012). Securing quality teachers for rural and remote schools should be the responsibility of all teacher education providers (Page, 2006; White & Reid, 2008) and those who teach future teachers, their teacher educators. Teacher education programs need to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore what differentiates living and working in Australia's regional and rural communities from urban settings (Boylan, 2005) and build pre-service teachers' ability to recognize and understand the differences across social, cultural, geographical, historical, political, and service domains.

Findings from the three year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project titled *Renewing Rural Teacher Education: Sustaining Schooling for Sustainable Future* (now known as TERRAnova, (see Reid et al., 2012; Reid et al., 2011) provided case studies of twenty schools from across Australia that all were identified as successfully retaining high-quality teaching staff and going against the staffing churn trend (where success was measured as maintaining beginning staff for more than three years). It is important to revisit some of the findings in thinking about the knowledge and theoretical base for teacher educators. In almost all of the case studies, 'community-readiness' was a key feature for ongoing success in retaining quality teachers (White, 2010; Reid et al., 2010; White & Kline, 2012; Reid et al., 2011). Communities where recruitment and retention were high, actively sought to positively involve graduate teachers in their community. Likewise graduates who were well prepared to understand the importance of 'community knowledge' to the success of their own students learning appeared more likely to stay in many of the case studies.

Interestingly given the 'harder to staff' communities of the US there are similarities between 'rural' Australia and 'urban' America. There are similarities, for example, in the findings and the work of Lois Moll and colleagues, and their notion of 'funds of knowledge' (1992) as they worked

with urban Latino populations, and the work of Australian Pat Thompson's 'virtual schoolbags' (2002). Rural schools and communities that recruited and retained teachers appeared to be working within a 'funds of knowledge' approach similar to the findings of Moll and colleagues. Schools and communities keen to support the graduate teachers to know and value the individual and collective households' knowledge, culture and language, had more success.

In one case from the TERRAnova study, the community provided a 'whole of community induction' that included pre-service teachers welcomed in a formal Shire sponsored event by the Mayor with supportive graduate recruitment and retention strategies built into their Community Council plan. In this case study, pre-service and in-service teachers were identified as key to the town's economic and social development and productivity (See Hamilton Case Study in Reid et al., 2011). The important links between school and community echo, Smyth's (2013) report on his project, known by the working title 'The Teachers' Learning Project' whereby case studies of schools and a set of professional development modules for classroom teachers and teacher educators revealed for example the importance of 'enhancing school–community dialogue'.

Analysis across the studies and literature reveal three main theories that consistently emerge from which to contribute to a knowledge base. Namely 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992); 'rural social space' (Reid, Green, Cooper, Hastings, Lock, & White, 2010) and 'place consciousness' (Gruenewald, 2003). Given the significance placed on school and community knowledge emerging from the studies, I particularly argue for a more expansive approach to curriculum design beyond just a 'classroom ready' focus to encompass a 'school and community readiness' (see White, Kline, Hasting, & Lock, 2012) also. This means that teacher educators' personal and contextual knowledge needs to reflect this thinking. Understandings of 'place' (Gruenewald, 2003) and spatiality sit alongside this work. Gruenewald (2013) explains: *A theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human-world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say* (p.624).

DEVELOPING A KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR ALL TEACHER EDUCATORS

A revisit and examination of the research (teacher) literature and studies confirms that simply preparing *more* teachers is not the answer to the staffing churn experienced by rural school communities – rather what is needed are (rural) teacher educators who take a rural standpoint and who can reconceptualise their teacher education programs. Teachers and I argue teacher educators need to be prepared to teach students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to themselves. They need to approach the decision and preparation to teach in a rural community by looking at the benefits of the community rather than from a deficit viewpoint (Thompson, 2002). They need to acknowledge and match learning experiences that significantly build on the rich and diverse lives of rural and regional students; to be prepared to teach different developmental stages and ages in any one learning experience or classroom setting. As Reid et al. (2010) remind us *coming to know a place means recognising and valuing the forms of social and symbolic capital that exist there, rather than elsewhere. It means using the resources of the people who know* (p. 272). Shulte (2016) similarly agrees, noting the value of place consciousness drawing from Gruenewald (2003) highlighting:

> …becoming aware of social places as cultural products requires that we bring them into our awareness for conscious reflection and unpack their particular cultural meanings. Such is the educative potential of place conscious education (p. 627).

Corbett (2016) adds:

> We need to support ways of thinking about teaching in rural contexts that are non-standard and that directly address persistent and pressing rural problems such as: population loss, resource industry restructuring, resource depletion, environmental and habitat degradation and land use policy (p. 147).

Just as Thompson (2002) highlighted the need for teachers to understand the places from which their students come from in order to connect more meaningfully students to their communities, so too do teacher educators need to adopt a place-conscious approach in their teacher education curriculum that links pre-service teachers and teachers to the places they will work and the students they seek to serve (White & Reid, 2008). As Shulte (2016) notes: *place conscious education can empower students in rural settings to connect to their community in ways that challenge rural stereotypes and honour their presence there* (p. 34). Thinking as (rural) teacher educators about becoming 'community ready, school ready and classroom ready' (White 2010, White & Kline, 2012) might further open up the spaces for preparing our future teachers. Helping pre-service teachers and indeed beginning teachers look beyond the classroom to the school community is important, and is vital to better understand rural and regional students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and the virtual school bags that teachers need to unpack (Thompson, 2002). Understanding a 'rural social space' (Reid et al., 2010) is consistent with a place consciousness approach. A rural social space is *the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and ti*me (p. 269). This speaks to teacher educators' pedagogical and sociological knowledge. It is important to note here that to understand that rural communities are diverse (not deficit) and that knowing one place is not the same as knowing all places. As Reid and colleagues (2010) highlight:

> *Moving beyond the stereotypes symbolically evoked in descriptions of the rural 'problem' in education is essential for sustaining and enhancing the diversity of rural communities* (p. 268).

CONCLUSION

This paper offers insights into the knowledge base and 'good theoretical tools' for all (rural) teacher educators, naming a triad of three interconnected main themes. This triad or 'trialectical' thinking *relentlessly catapults us out of comfortable binary categorisation and into an ever emergent and always unpredictable Thirdspace* (Corbett, 2016, p.142). This form of thinking' encourages a move away from binaries and into hybrid or 'third space' (see for example Green & Reid, 2014; Zeichner, 2010) where transformative thinking can occur. 'Rural social space' (another form of trialectical thinking), 'place consciousness' and 'funds of knowledge' can be used across urban and rural settings as the literature highlights and; can offer new generative spaces to explore the professional learning of (rural) teacher educators. This alternative *outward looking approach* (Menter et al., 2010, p. 136) thinking about teacher educators' professional learning is inspired by teacher education scholars who call for an integration of competing discourses in new ways (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Rather than adopt an either/or approach to the perceived rural-urban binaries; hybrid or third spaces enable a *both and also* (Soja, 1996, p. 5) approach, enabling a multiple knowledge and theoretical framework. A trialectic response to adding the rural to teacher educators is therefore an 'activist' approach as noted by Routledge (1996):

> *…a space that enables the disruption of both sites in both directions, whereby each may learn to 'occupy the subject position of the other' (Spivak, 1990: 121), and in doing so create something else …*(p.402)

I have written, revisited and shared the findings in this paper as a way to link more closely the research we do to sustaining rural communities. At the heart of the research work that I am endeavouring to do here and its place within this special issue is to speak to teacher educators and to a wider range of stakeholders interested in improving rural education, both in Australia and internationally. Our collective attempt is to address the 'good of the research' we do for rural students, their families and community.

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