POSTSCRIPT
TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF RURAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

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It was a privilege to be invited to offer some teacher education policy perspectives at the preconference workshop of the AARE Rural Education Special Interest Group in late 2014, and to have the invitation extended to participate with a brief policy postscript in this special edition of the *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*. Themes I discussed at the 2014 workshop included the role of the state regulatory authority in the accreditation and ongoing monitoring of initial teacher education programs, and how the phases of preparation, registration, employment and ongoing support of teachers are intersected and affected by aspects of context.

Exposure to the various presentations and discussions on that workshop day in 2014 highlighted the largely uncritical way in which I had previously understood the complexity of rurality and its educational and social implications. This suite of papers makes a valuable contribution to better understanding the issues confronting the current state of rural education research in Australia. The ongoing research and thinking underpinning these papers serve to focus the attention of education policy makers and implementers on the ways in which key stakeholders view rurality and how this matters in the preparation, employment and support of a quality teacher workforce in Australia.

Quality, Quantity and Location of Teachers

In an era of high accountability, ensuring that teachers are effective in their school contexts clearly involves collaborative and complementary practices across a range of stakeholders. The introduction of nationally agreed professional standards has been an important outcome of the recent quality teaching agenda in Australia that has assisted in this area. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) were endorsed by all Australian and State and Territory Ministers for Education in December 2010 and implemented across jurisdictions from 2012. The seven Professional Standards describe the professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement required of teachers across four career stages, reflecting a continuum of developing professional expertise (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), 2011).

A lot has happened in the Australian education policy space in the 12 months since the 2014 AARE workshop. The quality of teachers and their practice, and the effect on student outcomes, continue to come under intense national scrutiny (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG), 2014). The TEMAG report identifies the initial teacher education phase as the key area of accountability for ensuring that beginning teachers are 'classroom ready'. However, as

important as this initial preparation phase is, beginning teachers pass through a number of phases in a professional continuum, and that focussing on only one point of this pathway for accountabilities will not necessarily bring the required long-term solutions (Roberts-Hull, Jensen & Cooper, 2015).

As well as the quality issue, governments across all Australian jurisdictions are grappling with ensuring an adequate supply of teachers, with predictions of a substantial increase in numbers of students in most states in coming years (Asia Society, 2014; Audit Office of New South Wales, 2013; Masters, 2015). There are about 16,000 domestic graduate teachers completing initial teacher education courses each year, and it is forecast that the total number of students in Australia will increase by around 26 per cent (or about 900,000) over the next decade, with the highest rates of growth expected to be in Queensland (Productivity Commission, 2012, as cited in Mayer, Doecke, Ho, Kline, Kostogriz, Moss, North, & Walker-Gibbs, (LTEWS), 2014).

Where this growth will occur will be important to factor into the preparation and recruitment of new teachers (as well as how school funding allocations are determined). The Regional Universities Network website states that 34 per cent of Australians live outside capital city areas and 30 per cent live outside major cities, and that:

> Despite common misconceptions, the population of regional Australia is rising. Between 2007 and 2012, the population outside of Australia's major cities grew by 6.6%. The Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that the population outside capital cities will grow by 26% between 2007 and 2026.

The extent and location of this predicted growth in student numbers has implications for both the preparation and employment phases of the teacher workforce. Rural populations and locations are often defined as deficient and marginal and the way that rurality is represented, experienced and imagined impacts significantly on the mindsets evident within both phases. This is important to understand in the current context of increasing flexible delivery of initial teacher education programs and the greater mobility of the workforce. Now a teacher candidate may have been prepared anywhere in Australia and be employed in a range of schooling contexts across diverse geographic locations very different to the communities they know and lived in previously.

Accredited initial teacher education programs are required to address the full range of student diversity. Specific program standards focus on partnerships between higher education institutions and schools that provide opportunities for preservice teachers to develop an appreciation of the diversity of students and communities which schools serve. Despite the best intentions of the Standards it is difficult to ensure and know that every preservice teacher has had the opportunity to experience different contexts and learners in rural schools, schools with large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and schools in multicultural/low socioeconomic communities. However, teacher education providers will be required to show evidence of the impact of their programs for reaccreditation purposes in the near future, so this may be better evidenced in time.

Similarly there are implications for employment practices. If permanently employed teachers are required to work anywhere in a jurisdiction at some point in their careers as part of their conditions of employment, all teachers need to be prepared in what it means to live and to educate rurally. The fact that many beginning teachers accept initial rural placements as an incentive to get early permanency further exacerbates the issue, with inexperienced teachers staffing schools in communities they are under prepared for. In order to properly plan for future workforce needs it is essential that accurate and robust data is generated that will provide a better understanding of developments and trends that will both shape the teacher workforce of the future as well as allow teachers the best possible opportunities to be effective practitioners (Weldon, 2015).

Early Career Teachers, Unfamiliar Contexts and the Role of the Principal

New teachers arrive in their first workplace with energy, enthusiasm, anticipation and the best of intentions to succeed, bringing fresh ideas and a sense of renewal into established school communities (Shuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, & Russell 2012). Thus the transition phase into work is often filled with high expectations but also unexpected difficulties, and the conditions under which beginning teachers experience their first years in the profession often determines the effectiveness, attitudes and behaviours they will develop and sustain for an entire career, as well as their intentions to stay long-term in the profession (DeAngelis et al., 2013; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Social Ventures Australia, 2013).

The location of school context plays an important role in shaping the experience of beginning teachers (Gu & Day, 2011). Many beginning teachers start their careers in disadvantaged schools, and schools in rural or remote locations. The 2013 Staff in Australia's Schools survey reports that early career teachers (ECTs) make up 22% of the primary teacher workforce, but nearly half of these (45%) work in remote schools. ECTs make up 18% of the secondary teacher workforce and nearly a third of these (30%) are based in remote locations (McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley, Murphy & McMillan, 2014).

Principals, as school leaders, are interpreters and enactors of systemic policies on behalf of their school communities (Sullivan & Morrison, 2014). The principal is thus positioned to play a powerful role in not only the effective recruitment of teachers best suited to their school context but to the development of supportive learning cultures in their schools ensuring 'strategic access to appropriate on-going support, resources and learning opportunities to support graduate teachers during the time of transition' (p. 606). For teacher registration purposes, the principal also plays a key role in the process of advancing a provisionally registered teacher to full registration.

It would seem though, that many principals, particularly those new to the role, do not receive sufficient professional development and resources to effectively recruit the teachers they need, nor to develop the efficacy and confidence of the beginning teachers in their schools (Australian College of Education, 2001; Cameron, 2009; Dabbs, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Freeman, O'Malley, & Eveleigh, 2014; Jenkins, 2015; SMHC, 2009; Sullivan & Morrison, 2014). Further complications can occur through the high turnover of early career principals in rural schools on their own career trajectories. This can impact on provisionally registered teachers in these schools not having the support of stable school leadership to move to full registration in similar ways and timeframes to their colleagues based in larger, urban contexts.

A Shared Solution

The underlying theme of this special edition is that rurality is everybody's business. To adequately address the issues and concerns raised in these papers from a policy perspective requires a shared solution. It is not the responsibility of a single stakeholder to ensure teachers are well prepared, well recruited and well supported for living and working in diverse communities. It requires all stakeholders to have mindsets and skills that transcend any deficit notion of what living outside urban locations means.

Initial teacher education providers, registration authorities and employers readily acknowledge the shared responsibility for the development and employment of effective teachers. However, to push past the rhetoric to action there must be a focus on the situated perceptions, thoughts and understandings of all stakeholders about how teachers are prepared for rural contexts, and to be alert to the changing population trends and workforce needs.

We must collectively question the norms that perpetuate the binaries of urban and rural, where schooling and its implementation is dominated by a metro-urban perspective, and think differently and creatively about how an interdisciplinary approach to research, policy and

practice can acknowledge rurality as a complex cultural and educational factor. Deeply understanding and enacting the importance of 'place' clearly does matter in the preparation of teachers who will become effective and inclusive practitioners.

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