



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

THE MANY BENEFITS OF WORKING IN A RURAL SCHOOL; A TEACHER'S JOURNEY

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Abstract

Teaching in a regional or remote setting brings many benefits and rewards. There are of course the intrinsic rewards associated with making a real difference to student learning and there are the lifelong friendships that are forged from living and working in a small and friendly community. For many, including Paul Natale, another benefit can be the opportunity to work in senior leadership roles from a very early career stage. It has been six years since Paul moved to Newman, a mining town in a remote part of Western Australia's Pilbara region. To get where he is today, Paul has taken a different path to that of his colleagues, but he has not looked back since moving from Perth to Newman and he is in no rush to leave.

My Journey

My teaching journey began in 2014 as a 30-year-old. I've always pursued my passions and through my twenties most of my time was dedicated to travel and soccer. Regardless of what I did, in my occupations and pursuits, I noticed a pattern— I kept getting nominated for leadership roles in some capacity. My body began to tell me a paid-soccer career was no longer viable, so I thought I would try teaching. Shortly after, and purely by coincidence, my workplace hosted a career expo where Murdoch University was hosting a stall advertising the prospect of undertaking a teaching internship in the Pilbara.

Recruitment: This was the catalyst for me to make a change. I took the first critical step and submitted an application, followed by an interview, at which, I was asked to express my reasons for wanting to pursue an internship. Once I had satisfied the criteria and met up with some other prospective interns, Murdoch commenced preparing us for the next step. This involved an interview with three Pilbara high school principals who were looking for interns for their schools—Karratha Senior High School, Hedland Senior High School and Newman Senior High School. After meetings with each principal, I was excited to receive offers for an internship from all three schools—my gut said Newman.

I flew up late November 2014 to look after some important “*housekeeping matters*”, including choosing where I would like to live and to undertake an orientation of sorts. A fire had swept through the Maths/Science office in October of that year, so my orientation was conducted at one of the local primary schools where the high school staff had been relocated.

This was my first taste of the realities of life in a rural setting. Remarkably, in this instance, the high school staff had seamlessly continued their practice through sharing classrooms with the primary school staff. During this initial visit, I also decided to train with one of the local football teams. I knew from my soccer history that joining a sports team would aid in building a rapport with the community and assist in integrating into town life. Another observation—apart from the heat—was the beauty of the Pilbara region; I couldn't wait to start my journey in 2015.

The internship was based on a gradual release model. Early in Term 1, my job was to complete assignments related to the Graduate Diploma—in my new home, away from the school—for two days a week, and to observe classes for the other three days. I was teaching some lessons under supervision from my Head of Learning Area by Week 5 and this turned into multiple lessons per week by Term 2. In Term 3 I was given my own class to plan for, report on and teach and at the end of the term I received an “*early offer*” and began full-time employment in Term 4. This summary brushes over countless learning experiences I had that year and the support I received from the Murdoch University and Department of Education staff responsible for helping me to secure my Internship and who regularly visited the school to assess my progress throughout 2015.

Teaching opportunities: Before delving into my reflections and learning experiences, I will summarise my journey from 2016 to the present. My 2016 teaching load was a mix of lower school Science and Physical Education. Owing to a shortage of staff in Physical Education, and the impression my sporting ability had made in town, I was provided the opportunity to teach some Physical Education classes. I had been told that rural workplaces provided “*opportunity*” and I was impressed I would be getting experience in two Learning Areas. In science, to assist me, I had a wonderful lab technician who had lived in Newman for many years and knew many people—and the curriculum!

From a school sport perspective, I had the opportunity to work closely with Adelaide Crows Women's Captain, Chelsea Randall; From a community and school sporting perspective, I had the opportunity to take local football teams to Subiaco Oval, other Pilbara Schools and further enhance my skills in this area through the regular visits from West Coast Eagles players via a BHP partnership with VSwans (www.vswans.com.au/home).

My teaching load changed slightly during 2017 and 2018. I dropped one of my lower school science classes and picked up the academic extension ACE class. I was completely understanding and appreciative of the fact that my Head of Learning Area wanted me to cut my teeth with a range of other classes before providing the opportunity to further the development of students of a higher academic ability. On reflection, I learned about what did and did not work in terms of engaging students at all levels, including how to manage behaviour, moderate and assess, use data to inform planning and the importance of team work. I was also building networks through my participation in the Department's fully-funded Graduate Support Program and, at the same time, I was quickly amassing a portfolio of work to demonstrate that I was “*proficient*” against the AITSL standards.

By the end of 2018—my third year officially—I began to receive requests to be “*caretaker HOLA*”. Additionally, I was asked to take on a number of important whole-of-school planning tasks such as timetabling, performance management, budget allocation and involvement in school leadership meetings. I realised, speaking with colleagues at other schools around the state, that the opportunities I was being provided were not easily achieved elsewhere.

In 2019, my teaching load took on more changes. I taught upper school General Mathematics for the first time and dropped a couple of classes to take on a non-teaching student services role as Upper School Year Coordinator. The principal also offered me the opportunity to be “*caretaker Deputy Principal*” whilst our leadership went through some changes. New tasks included liaising

with some of our key external stakeholders, such as BHP and TAFE, playing a bigger role in whole-school planning and reviewing some of our policies.

So, as of December 2019, this is where I am, and I enjoy the job way too much to contemplate leaving anytime soon. The challenge of planning and delivering engaging lessons, the satisfaction of getting valuable feedback from students and staff, my ever-increasing interest in working with the school community to build staff morale and play a lead role in whole-school approaches, are all too good to walk away from. For now, staying in Newman and forging a career in public education is front and centre.

Reflections: It's difficult to pinpoint exactly what effect the Internship had on me and my choice to stay in town and pursue leadership opportunities. I was fortunate to have entered teaching, while still relatively young, after enjoying many prior life experiences. As an aside, I also feel that the new two-year Master of Teaching qualification better prepares pre-service teachers for "*life in the workplace*". I was always going to make myself a success, regardless of the hurdles that were thrown at me, but I remain grateful for the opportunity that the internship and the assistance of the Department of Education provided me to make a running start to my career.

On reflection, I fully understand the anecdote that "*it takes five years to become a good teacher*". During your first two years, you can tick off your graduate portfolio with strong support in the form of graduate modules, graduate release days and coaching. Next, it is up to you to choose the pathway you want to take, whether that be a curriculum or student services leader or a senior teacher. You begin to "*feel*" like you are delivering more and more good lessons, and that it takes rigorous feedback, assessment against standards and challenging conversations with experienced people to understand where you are, and why some teachers are held in such high regard. Understanding your content deeply, the use of data to inform planning, engaging a class consistently, differentiating for the wide ability gaps/learning preferences, managing challenging behaviour, teaching social skills, providing feedback, reporting on progress, liaising with parents/carers and working closely with staff are not skills that all teachers have straight out of university.

As with many things in life, teaching in a remote, regional school is always interesting and it comes with the added bonus of experiencing leadership opportunities at a very early career stage. For me, something as "*seemingly trivial*" as a change in leadership caused me to re-think the whole way I went about teaching. It certainly helped me get a better sense of the bigger picture. There are several whole-school approaches to teaching-and-learning that are all research-based, but each of these have to be experienced over time to build your "*teaching toolkit*". I believe you can only last in this job if this journey of self-improvement is appealing and rewarding and is coupled with a passion for facilitating student progress.

To finish, I would highly recommend "*going rural*" to start your career. There will be challenges of course, but it is what you make of it that will determine your success. Newman has been a great career-launching platform for me and many of my colleagues and I encourage anyone with a passion for teaching and a taste for adventure to consider working in Newman or a town like it. I have not regretted a single minute.