

AN INVESTIGATION OF EARLY CAREER TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR TEACHERS IN RURAL AND REMOTE QUEENSLAND

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that to live and work in the remote regions of Australia requires specific skills and expertise to accommodate the shifting demands of outback life. For professionals assigned to such areas by employing bodies, this is particularly the case, and teachers are no exception. In addition to such personal attributes, professionals such as teachers must maintain currency in their professional practice both to serve their students appropriately and to ensure that they become eligible for future promotions and transfers possibilities. This study investigated whether teachers in rural and remote regions are disadvantaged in ways that could potentially affect their teaching careers in negative ways, in particular in terms of professional development and career advancement opportunities. Such opportunities are crucial if teachers are to provide an education of high relevance to rural and remote children who are already considered to be significantly disadvantaged in terms of educational provision. The data are presented in the form of a single teacher narrative, a composite tale aimed at telling the story of rural and remote teachers, professional development provision and career advancement opportunities. It was apparent that teachers in these contexts face serious challenges in terms of their professional and career development.

INTRODUCTION

In rural and remote Australia, the demands of outback living require a broad range of skills and expertise to deal with the changing conditions. This is particularly the case for teachers assigned to such regions. According to the New South Wales Teachers Federation (2002, p. 1):

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Public schools are the foundation upon which rural communities are built. They provide a focus for community activities and contribute greatly to the social, cultural, educational and sporting life of communities. The role schools play in community building can never be underestimated or overstated.

The staffing of rural and remote schools impacts on the quality and equity of educational experience for rural Australians (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2001; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). How rural and remote schools are staffed to achieve equity remains an important issue for state education systems (Martinez, 1993).

According to Sharplin (2002), rural and remote teachers have many advantages such as access to permanent employment status, increased pay and leave entitlements and increased accumulation of transfer points used to relocate to less remote areas. However, there still remains a series of disadvantages for these educators. These disadvantages are based on the notion that many rural teachers may not be receiving enough credit, recognition and education to enhance their careers and to add further capacity to rural communities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003). It is a constant reminder in rural and remote communities that teachers do not work in isolation nor do they work in environments solely of their own choosing; rather they are seen to be integral members of their respective communities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004).

This study investigates whether teachers in rural and remote regions are disadvantaged in ways that could potentially affect their teaching careers negatively, in particular in terms of professional development (see also Umar, this issue) and career advancement opportunities. Such opportunities are crucial if teachers are to provide an education that is relevant to rural and remote children.

In Queensland, professional development and career advancement opportunities for teachers have become a major concern as the state looks at ways to improve the quality of education, particularly for those considered to be disadvantaged. In accordance with Education Queensland's (2004a) *Destination 2010* document, professional development and career advancement contribute to the pedagogical practice and delivery within the classroom setting. Therefore rural and remote teachers must have currency in their knowledge and skill bases in accordance with the requirements of their occupation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). It is not difficult to argue then that professional development and career advancement opportunities are as important for rural and remote teachers as they are for their urban counterparts.

It is widely accepted that rural, and more specifically remote, areas have more difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff (see also Umar, this issue). Therefore the issue of teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the availability of professional development and career advancement in these areas is of key importance (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Gibson, 1994; McEwan 1999). According to Kerr and Lake (1994) and McGaw (1977), within Queensland 87% of teachers are appointed to country schools in their first two years of teaching. Historically, new graduates have staffed rural and remote schools and recent reports continue to identify the employment of inexperienced staff in rural and remote schools as an issue (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). The difficulty of staffing rural and remote schools has been linked with negative perceptions of teaching in such environments. Sharplin (2002) believes that the negative

stereotype depicting rural schools as inferior, suffering from staffing instability and inexperience, although prevalent, tends to be unjustified.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research was framed by one main research question pertinent to this field of study:

What are the professional development and career advancement opportunities available to early career teachers within rural and remote Queensland schools?

To address this question two sub-questions were developed which helped to guide the study:

- Is there equal opportunity for and equal access to professional development and career advancement opportunities for rural and remote teachers?
- What are the significant barriers that influence professional development and career advancement possibilities for rural and remote early career teachers?

The geographical complexities of such a study necessarily limited the potential participants. The participants were drawn from seven primary schools in Central Queensland. All schools were part of the government school sector. Participants were invited to participate with the approval of the Principal and 10 teachers responded.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Rural education as a whole has an impact on teaching and learning in a multitude of ways. Higgins (1993) believed that early career teachers need to be provided with a requisite amount of knowledge and understanding to facilitate 'survival' within rural and remote teaching locations and that this should be in addition to normal training and preparation. Moreover, Higgins argued that this should include professional development opportunities as an important aspect of this preparation program. Further to this, Higgins also saw professional development as a key aspect of teaching and learning within the Queensland education system and therefore pertinent to rural and remote educators. By implication, Higgins in his analysis suggested that there is a significant problem within the current education system in relation to rural and remote areas. We would argue that this situation persists today.

According to the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) (1994), rural and remote teachers have traditionally received inadequate access to professional development programs and may therefore be inappropriately disadvantaged in terms of professional currency and professional advancement. SPERA recognises the importance of supporting and encouraging rural communities and educators to work towards the provision of quality education and training (Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, 1994).

Education Queensland (2003a) states that Queensland's size and sparse population pose challenges for the provision of educational services to rural and remote areas. Issues of access, resourcing and curriculum affect the educational outcomes of students in rural and remote areas. Education Queensland is attempting to work towards many goals for rural and remote teachers as they provide geographic alliances and partnerships (see also Hughes and Cleary, this issue), schools of distance education, scholarships and support programs for transport, travel and other special needs.

Through its *Code of Ethics for Queensland Teachers*, Education Queensland (2004b) is attempting to demonstrate both the desirability and the necessity of participating in continuing professional development. What is important to note is that this is inclusive of location and size of school; hence there is an expectation even for those within isolated contexts to engage in dedicated and organised professional learning.

Other Australian states have attempted to tackle the so-called tyranny of distance by creating alliances between rural and remote teachers and teachers within metropolitan areas. Historically, however, this has proven difficult to achieve. According to the Tasmanian Government in 1971, small rural communities were in dire need of educational support and improvement (Education Department of Tasmania, 1971). The Tasmanian Government highlighted the ongoing problems that rural and remote teachers faced in regards to professional development opportunities. Whilst this work is now over 30 years old it is reasonable to suggest that such problems persist.

It is significant then that within the literature the physical challenge of distance is identified as a restricting factor for rural and remote teachers in accessing professional development opportunities to enhance their teaching and learning programs. Education Queensland (2003) supports the view that teachers who live in rural and in particular remote locations experience varying degrees of difficulty in accessing educational services. Even though distance is the prime factor, the concomitant factors associated with this are financial cost and time (Education Queensland, 2003). In addition, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) highlights several factors contributing to such difficulties and, though some are common to Education Queensland's analysis, others include competing pressures on school finances and school programs, a lack of availability of relief staff and time away from family commitments.

The Rural Strategies Project (1997) highlighted that professional development opportunities are compromised for rural and remote teachers and thereby emphasised the fact that these physical constraints tend to limit the provision of such opportunities. According to the Rural Strategies Project (1997, p. 4), "in most instances, these barriers do not act in isolation allowing a simple, inexpensive and speedy solution to be effected. As some research indicates, definitive and cost-effective solutions continue to be elusive due to the complex nature of the problems that arise from the interrelationship of these barriers".

According to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2001, p. 1), "this lack of access to professional development is an important concern for rural and remote teaching staff". Professional development leads to enhancement within the occupation and within some Australian states to promotional opportunities (Human Rights and

Equal Opportunity Commission, 2001). According to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2001, p. 1):

[I]n spite of a heightened case for professional development in rural and remote schools, the barriers of distance, insufficient funding and the lack of relief staff mean that rural and remote teachers have less access to professional development than their metropolitan counterparts.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) argues that finding qualified staff for rural and remote schools – especially staff to stay for several years and thus make a commitment to the community – is a very real problem. Some researchers have suggested that this is directly related to the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers and thus considered another physical constraint within these locations. This is the focus of this research.

METHOD

The qualitative paradigm was the preferred approach to this study. The tools used within this project were open ended, heuristic questionnaire/surveys, designed by the lead researcher, given to key schools in three different education districts in Central Queensland. These were followed by semi-structured interviews, which were used to integrate teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards professional development opportunities and career advancement in rural and remote Queensland.

The research sites

Data were collected from Education Queensland primary schools in the three districts in Central Queensland. The first district is situated 335 kilometres from Brisbane. It covers thirty-one Education Queensland schools. The second and largest district is situated 480 kilometres from Brisbane and is home to thirty-three schools. The final district is situated 1180 kilometres from Brisbane and contains twenty-three schools in total. All schools that were 100 kilometres away from their district office were contacted by e-mail to establish interest in participation.

A selection of participants was interviewed to gain an insight into personal accounts of access to professional development. Participants were selected for interviews in accordance with their responses to the survey. If the participants had strong or seemingly contradictory views, they were invited to be part of a semi-structured interview, thus providing an incidental sample. Interview data were collected either by telephone or in person.

Data analysis

The data were analysed and in some forms tabulated to outline the major themes. By drawing out these major themes/concerns, it was possible to make sense of the professional development and career advancement opportunities for rural and remote teachers within Queensland.

Qualitative data present challenges in seeking to analyse textual, visual and aural data from a multitude of data sources. Qualitative modes of data analysis provide ways of discerning, examining, comparing and contrasting and interpreting meaningful patterns

or themes. For the most part (though not exclusively), qualitative analysis deals in words and is guided by fewer universal rules and standardised procedures than statistical analysis (Patton, 1990, p. 1). To maintain qualitative integrity, we decided to represent the data in the form of narrative or 'teacher stories' (see also Henderson, this issue). Drawing on the words of Aguinaldo (2004, p. 4), the research findings are "envisioned here as narratives that are premised upon particular ontological and epistemological claims". Drawing from Sparkes (2002), these stories are represented as fictional tales or composites of the key issues that reside in the data. The work of Ryan (2005) is also an important precedent here.

THE DATA – A FICTIONAL TEACHER TALE

In the interests of brevity, one narrative or fictional tale is presented here. Tim is a composite of the views of the many teachers interviewed.

Tim

Tim is an early career teaching principal who has had five years' teaching experience. During that time Tim has worked at two schools within the state of Queensland where he received his first teaching experience in an urban school, or a school under 100 kilometres from a district office. To further his career, Tim moved to a remote school to become a band five teaching principal. Tim is committed to providing his staff and himself with a large number of professional development and career advancement opportunities.

Tim feels that there are a number of professional development and career advancement opportunities available for teachers in rural and remote areas; however, they could be more frequent. Tim also believes that the opportunities that are provided to rural and remote teachers do not relate directly to their location and needs in rural Queensland. He now feels that these opportunities are directed at general, mainstream, band eight, schools and therefore do not relate to 'two teacher' rural and remote educational institutions.

Because professional development and career advancement have previously been heavily based on Education Queensland policy and current initiatives, Tim believes that there is little or no support for the areas in which he is employed and the teachers residing in these areas. However, Tim feels that Education Queensland is improving in terms of accessibility and there are now a number of professional development and career advancement opportunities available at a district level as opposed to a state level. Clusters of principals have begun to meet on a regular basis at district office to share knowledge and attend professional development and career advancement sessions.

Teacher Voice

Education Queensland could improve professional development and career advancement by recognising remote and rural state schools and catering for our geographical distance from main town centres.

According to Tim, however, the staff at his school have not received enough professional development and career advancement owing to the lack of availability. Tim is adamant in suggesting that it is not only the teaching staff at the school who need to

attend professional development and career advancement opportunities. All staff from the gardener to the teacher aides need to attend these opportunities to encourage lifelong learning possibilities. The need for all staff to attend professional development and career advancement sessions is due to the fact that the support and auxiliary staff members are utilised in a different manner within these teaching contexts for the obvious reasons of lack of size and resources.

Tim believes there are significant barriers that mean that staff members within rural and remote locations in Queensland have fewer opportunities to attend professional development and career advancement sessions. Significant among them is the prioritising of time and money within a school. With only 10% of a school's budget going to professional development and career advancement, it is pertinent that Education Queensland funds rural and remote schools to support the attendance of staff at these opportunities.

Tim said that, as well as the replacement of a teacher for one day costing the school upwards of \$270, the registration fee for the opportunity itself can be up to \$600. These factors along with accommodation and travel costs all add up to discourage rural and remote teachers from attending these experiences. Tim believes that if most professional development and career advancement opportunities were not held within metropolitan areas rural and remote staff would have an increased chance to attend.

Teacher Voice

Education Queensland do offer a lot of professional development and career advancement to rural and remote staff; however, it needs to be staggered consecutively through the school terms to offer more variety in practical pedagogy.

Teacher Voice

No one wants to take money from the school budget to attend professional development and career advancement.

Tim also believes that professional development and career advancement should enable rural teachers to revise known concepts and theories to update current research. Often these opportunities provided are not realistic in relation to rural school situations in that they need to provide networking opportunities for rural teachers to work with one another to achieve common goals.

Furthermore this reflects Tim's beliefs that all children do not have the same needs and that these needs differ from those of children in urban areas. This he feels needs to be reflected through the integration and implementation of experiences that are pertinent to these rural children's and the school's needs.

Teacher Voice

Education Queensland needs to supply experiences that are specifically targeted to rural and remote teachers. Realistically professional development and career advancement are conducted to suit a particular audience. Therefore it is necessary that the information presented is appropriate to the location.

Tim is adamant that there is little or no rural education for classroom teachers in pre-service training. Therefore there is a significant need for professional development and career advancement to be geared towards early career teachers.

It appears from Tim's assessment that it is pertinent that Education Queensland provides more promotional scales of advancement by means of team leaders and leading teachers. Within the state of Queensland, there are principals who encourage staff to follow through with examining their own practice and with self-promotion. However, he still felt that there are not enough 'steps in the ladder' to further career, thereby restricting opportunities for advancement. Thus teachers have little possibility to advance themselves quickly whilst maintaining an effective and supportive classroom.

As a consequence Tim believes that there are not enough structures, band moves and salary motivations to encourage early career teachers to attend professional development and career advancement. Tim feels that perhaps Queensland lags behind the other states within Australia with respect to the provision of professional development and career advancement for rural and remote teachers. In order to make these experiences, more meaningful Education Queensland needs to survey rural teachers and find out the needs of the staff and the school as a whole.

Finally, Tim felt that as a Principal he is torn between advocating professional development activities during the normal school week and the costs to the school for replacement teachers. The financial burden involved invariably means that most opportunities that make financial sense are those that occur at weekends. Tim feels that only a small percentage of rural and remote teachers are prepared to spend their personal and family time transporting themselves to urban areas for these opportunities.

CONCLUSION

According to Sharplin (2002, p. 8), "the acceptance of a rural or remote teaching appointment represents more than a professional or career decision. As with many vocations involving relocation, the decision to accept a teaching appointment in a distant and unfamiliar community is likely to have significant personal and social repercussions". These data confirmed that teaching in rural and remote regions is distinctively different from teaching within urban areas and the suggestion is that professional development opportunities should be differentiated along similar lines. Moreover, Tim's story suggests that the career structure as it currently exists also appears to disadvantage teachers in rural and remote contexts.

Inevitably familiar barriers to full professional participation were identified that cluster around the idea of the tyranny of distance. However, the concomitant problems though not unseen but seldom talked about also expanded the picture of disadvantage for rural and remote teachers, specifically costs to the school and the lack of available teacher relief cover.

The lack of professional development opportunities for career advancement is a major concern in Queensland at the present time. This research forms the basis for an argument addressing the amount of professional development and career advancement available to rural and remote teachers.

This means that teachers face a powerful challenge as they are called upon to implement contemporary educational trends and to teach within specialist areas. It is clear that there are significant expectations within Education Queensland for rural and remote educators to attend professional development and career advancement opportunities. However, it is imperative that they must embrace new ways of delivery and therefore increase the provision to rural and often isolated areas. For example, just as there is a virtual school for secondary students and their curriculum delivery, so Education Queensland needs to explore, possibly in a partnership with Technical and Further Education (TAFE), the university sector and private providers, the option of a virtual professional development centre. This would allow technology to be the tool of delivery, thereby overcoming the tyranny of distance. In addition, it would be prudent to explore interstate and national options such as EdNA (Education Network Australia) Online and the distance education deliveries in South Australia and Western Australia. Utilising the delivery mechanisms for distance education schooling provides a valuable tool of delivery. Finally, local clusters could be encouraged and resourced to identify appropriate professional development for their specific needs. Identifying personnel outside the system to deliver this could also be encouraged.

It was apparent through the professional exchange among the rural educators that there is a large number of teachers willing to seek new ways to access and attend these opportunities. However, it is important that Education Queensland as a whole supplies these areas with the provision that they deserve as professionals within the education system.

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