

## SCHOOLING THE DUST BELT

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The summer rains didn't come this year and by June the district has had 13mls, all of it in drizzles and none of it enough to do much good. Peggy, the Acting CEO Quality Teaching in what is locally referred to as NIDA district (where everyone is acting) is driving to her fourth school for the week. It is Wednesday morning and since Monday she has hit four figures in kilometres travelled in her logbook. Peggy came to the district telling her friends in Sydney she would be back before the next opera season. Already she has missed three seasons and is wondering why. Peggy is in her fifties, single, a parent of grown up children and a teacher of thirty years experience. She lives alone in a small flat in the regional centre and drinks too much. Her teeth are playing up but she doesn't have time to see a dentist. She travels to schools in the area most days, rising early, arriving home late into the night. She loves this country – god knows she sees enough of it – and despite the browning off she loves its folds and gentle horizons. She loves the old windmills and the massive silos, great architectural structures jutting up above the fields that go on forever. Some days the colour of the sky is to die for. A few years ago when she first saw it the country was well stocked. She had begun learning the names of different types of cattle. Today the only animals in the paddocks are dead carcasses, poor things, bogged in the mud of what were once dams.

These days, with the abattoirs closed and the sale yards locked, the paddock gates are the only things open. What stock remains in the district is grazing the long paddocks. As she belts along the gravel, she notices a sign warning of stock ahead for the next 5 kilometres. She eases off the accelerator and slows to 140 kilometres an hour, glancing sideways for sign of movement. She hates it when some old farmer has forgotten to take the signs down and she slows for no reason. This morning, there is stock ahead, and a teenage boy not old enough for a license is riding behind the cattle on his motorbike, his red kelpie sitting awkwardly as pillion. He has to drive the herd 10 kilometres a day or risk fines for over-grazing. She slides past them leaving them in her dust.

Peggy recognises the boy from her last visit to the high school an hour back. He must have had to leave school. She clicks her tongue in annoyance. The school has a catchment area of 10,000 square kilometres and kids catch the bus for up to two hours to get to school. She remembers this boy as cheeky, yelling out that he wasn't going to read no girly books like *Educating Rita*. That year it had been a set text and the school principal backed the boy's refusals, telling Peggy over morning tea that the problem with secondary schooling in the bush was that it was largely irrelevant to boys – they need a curriculum for the river bank, one that recognises that most of the boys love being outdoors and active and have no interest in anything beyond the farm gate or town footy oval. The teachers in his school, some of them, he confides, need to go. They treat the boys as infants, failing to recognise that by year seven most of the boys can fix the water pump, drive a tractor and weld. Next year the school is due for some new teachers, new blood that the principal is looking forward to. He was due to retire but is going to stay on to help the new ones settle in. The principal is an experienced teacher from the coast, having begun his career many decades ago in a small country school. He loves the country and feels he has come home. His previous position was as a deputy

principal at a big high school on the coast with a strong TAFE connection. No-one knows their way around TAFE like he does, and since being at the bush high school he has transformed it to a mini-TAFE campus. 90% of the kids in the school are doing Vocational Education subjects. The community love it, the kids love it, and the teachers have made the transition and took up retraining offers, most of them. There are still a few old die-hards who hang on to their middle class values and their closed classroom doors and their HSC curriculum, he says, but they will leave soon enough.

He boasts that his students are rejecting the UAI for university entrance, don't need it, plan on staying in town. The local community is overjoyed. They have lost the last couple of generations of young people and they need the young ones to stay. Like most country towns, this one is ageing and its small businesses struggling. Aged care is the biggest industry in the district and 12 girls in year 10 are enrolled in an aged care course. Small business people in town love the kids doing work placements and traineeships. The school had the second highest number of traineeships in the state, despite its size. Vocational Education has meant that the teachers have had to open their classroom doors, develop different types of relationships with the kids, and get out into the community more. And the teachers are more accountable to the community – everyone can see whether the kids know how to drive a computer because they are on show during work placements. This is the future for this town, 'community renewal through schooling renewal'. 'Tell staffing not to send me any new teachers who aren't Voc Ed qualified' he added as Peggy had jumped into her white Commodore.

Thinking back on this encounter, Peggy had wondered about the girls in the school, the ones who wanted to get a good High School Certificate result. Whereas rural men's qualifications in the TAFE sector had risen dramatically in the past decade, the same rise had been seen in the number of rural women gaining university qualifications. The critique of the 'feminisation of the curriculum' that was all the buzz at the principal's council meetings was a worry, although she had to admit that boy's scores in the district on all the state tests from year 3 to year 12 were well below those of the girls. Perhaps the girls are doing OK, despite all this, she thought, but she knew also that all the scores in her district, for both girls and boys, were well below those of the metropolitan kids. The legislation that prohibited ranking of schools made it difficult for them to argue a case for the structural disadvantages of rural kids – they weren't an equity group as such, like students in the categories of gender, Indigeneity, and Non English Speaking Backgrounds. These are the equity categories recognised in the Department's annual reports. Rural schooling is a place, and you can't identify low performing schools by place. The equity funding programs like CAP and PSFP are helpful out here, but so many country schools fall through the cracks in terms of equity funding. And she wasn't sure that CAP funding was getting to the schools of most disadvantage. Remoteness wasn't really the only issue, with some of the remoter small schools catering mainly for children of rich cotton growers. The small land owner schools and the big river schools were doing OK; it was the others, particularly the Central schools and the schools for the dispossessed Indigenous families that were doing it rough. But then she thought, it's not that simple either. In some of the big river towns there were two schools, one increasingly white and one increasingly black. The department has no answer for this trend, and at heart most of the senior education advisors sympathised with the white families who are trying to get their kids out of the rougher schools, out of the schools where so much energy is spent on suspending kids and dealing with violence and poor

attendance. It always struck her as odd that the same schools troubled by low attendance were the ones with the highest suspension rates.

Having hours on the road meant hours to ponder these issues, but there was no-one she could talk to about them. Her boss was fantastic, the School Education Director, but he was on the road as much as she was. They joked occasionally about which of the consultants in the office had notched up the most miles, who would be getting the new car. They rarely travelled to schools together, but when they did the talk was good. Occasionally she would have some university researcher accompany her. They'd get into all these issues and she'd have to watch what she said, wanting to speak freely but worried about the consequences of loose lips sinking ships. Sometimes she thought, Bugger it, I'll just say what I think. If I don't nothing will ever change. In the early months, when she was shell shocked, she was much more tight-lipped. These days, she says what she thinks. Who will know anyway? Sydney is a long way away and she has learnt that her opinions matter little in terms of policy reform. All the policy is made in Sydney. The Sydney suits make the policies about suspensions, staffing, set texts for the HSC and seem happy enough with the trends in Vocational Education in rural areas. None of the big wigs who've come out this way understand the ways rural schools can actually create their own gender dichotomies, can disadvantage girls for the sake of re-engaging boys, and happily stream all the kids into working class futures. Still the local communities appear to be happy with what is happening, and who is she to say what they need? She turns up the volume on her new Dame Kiri CD. She glances at her watch, and puts her foot down. She has to get to the small one teacher school by morning tea time. The teaching-principal has a casual on class for the morning so that she can talk to Peggy.

She slows to 80 as she enters town, aware that she needs to be seen to be responsible in the government car. She arrives at the school gate to see the casual teacher, Mrs Harris, leave. Tess, the teaching principal explains that Mrs Harris had to leave early to get into town to the bank. She needs to renegotiate the family overdraft. Like many women in the district Mrs Harris' teaching income is the farm income. She has been casual teaching for ten years and despite applying for permanent jobs she is overlooked for positions time and again. Staffing appointments are managed in Sydney. How this all happens is like a big black hole: no-one in the district office can fathom it. Last week an overseas trained teacher arrived to take up a position as a teaching-principal, was driven out to the school by Mary in the office, took one look and asked to be driven back. Mary was philosophical: poor bugger, she had said, he didn't have a licence and wouldn't have coped. I could tell within 20 seconds of talking to him on the phone in Sydney that he wasn't right for the job. Good on him for coming out here though. Everyone within earshot mentally calculates the cost of the failed exercise but says nothing. Mary is an Indigenous woman from the local area, always polite and bright, despite her job of trying to keep schools in the area staffed. Over the Christmas period she is always in the office, sorting out the new intake, telling them not to bother looking for the name of the school on the map, and giving new teachers her personal phone number- 'Call me anytime' she tells them, and they do.

Tess greets Peggy like an old friend. She puts the kettle on. The two women have only met twice at school but for Tess Peggy is a life-line. Tess is a third year out teacher who is in her first year as a teaching-principal. She has eight students in her school. She would have more except that the publicly funded school bus passes the school gate

taking fifteen kids into town to attend private schools. The eight kids are from three families. Tess sees the same three mothers at the school gate each morning and afternoon and reports to them daily on the progress of individual children. Bill was a bit ratty today. I'm not surprised, he didn't sleep well. The electricity is off and we had to get the generator going for the bore pump. It thumped all night. Peggy recalls the schooling of her own children in Sydney a decade ago and wonders if any of the teachers even knew her, or her kids, for that matter.

How's it going, Tess? Great. I've already had my disaster for the day. The school water pipes froze over night. I got up this morning and my toothpaste was frozen – should have realised it was an omen. I called Trev from up the road and he told me who to contact in town. They're on their way. Tess and Peggy became close during Tess's first trauma at the school. Tess had come from a small Central school in the area with 100% Indigenous enrolment. She loved teaching there, despite the challenges. A violent incident in her second year meant she had to leave. The boss recognised her passion and drive and recommended her for the teaching-principal job in a quieter community. When she arrived at the new school, excited and terrified, she walked into the class, saw eight little angels sitting quietly on the mat and froze. One of the bigger boys saw her distress. You alright miss? She told them to have social time and left the room. After a moment she walked back in and started again. She can laugh about the incident now, but it threw her for a while and Peggy had helped her debrief around it. At the other school I'd been used to having kids hanging from the rafters. It was a struggle to get to the content of the lesson through all the behaviour problems and here I was and these little buttons were hanging on my every word. I couldn't handle the intimacy. I love it now, and I know how to regulate it. Tess says she is a dag at heart and uses comedy in her teaching and in her relationships in the community. Sometimes I catch myself out being so serious I freak out. One day while mowing the school grounds on the ride-on she couldn't see for the dust and drove into the school fence. Some of the dads were fixing the school house guttering and saw the incident. Thereafter everyone she met in the community offered to weld her a bull bar for the ride on mower. She says she sometime goes over the limit with her antics, but she says the community is very forgiving. She is a computer whiz and they love her for it, love that their kids know their way around computers.

Tess developed a PowerPoint show for the parents to explain the new Quality Teaching Model that the department is touting around the place. She even got the parents to try scoring a lesson. They loved it. Peggy was amazed. Her families are well educated. She has it easy compared to Trev up the road whose parents only want him to use chalk and talk. None of Trev's families have been beyond year 9 themselves and want things done the way they remember it. Trev is pulling his hair out and can't even go near the Quality Teaching model with the parents, with all its talk of intellectual quality and meta-language. Trev is in a difficult situation. He has five kids in his school. He has the toughest job of any of the teaching-principals in the small schools cluster he and Tess are part of. Easier to have fifteen kids than five in your class, argues Trev. Teaching *in loco parentis*, he calls it. I feel like I'm a full time dad with five kids all day. Trev isn't happy. He is a rock for Tess but he drinks every night and his hands shake. He needs to get out. The kids have all heard his jokes five times over and no kid should have to live through that, he says. His wife is an assistant principal 300 kilometres away and he usually only gets home on weekends. Some days he gets desperately lonely and makes the drive home only to arrive at school the next day looking wrecked. His new car

rattles already. Trev's school families are having more difficulty with the drought than Tess's. They are labourers and many are broke and having to move on. If his numbers drop any more the school could close. So he has to keep the existing families there by giving them what they want – chalk and talk is part of the package. Trev stocks the school freezer with pies and mini-pizzas as he has noticed the kids arriving without lunch. Tell your mums not to pack lunch tomorrow, we're having pies, he tells the kids. They love him.

Peggy looks over Tess's PowerPoint show on Quality Teaching. This is great. Could I use it? Tess developed another show for the Country Women's Association International day on Ireland. Each year they choose a country to study. They loved it. One old dear said to me, goodness, I didn't know you could carry a computer around in a backpack. She had the old dears over for afternoon tea, as they had been really kind in helping her settle in. She forgot to take down her rainbow gay pride flag. What's that dear, one of the women asked? Oh, that's my Tahitian Prayer Flag. So, you've gone a bit funny have you dear? Tess loves the job but has had to put her personal life on hold. At one of the principal's meetings in town she had just heard news that her girlfriend over on the coast was extremely sick and undergoing surgery. She cried all day and couldn't tell anyone why. The others think she is a bit emotional, although what she is doing with technology is amazing. I'm lucky my parents all want their kids to go to private schools in Sydney if they can afford it. Years ago the big private schools were more forgiving of country families regarding unpaid fees. Now everyone is edgy about their children's futures. They want the kids to be able to use laptops. My skills here are good for the cluster. Greg cooks great curries, Trev knows how to get pipes mended, Mary writes great programmes, and I help everyone operate the computers. We're a great team. Peggy loves visiting the cluster schools, especially now that her job involves talking about quality teaching. Last year she was responsible for the school accountability and improvement, meaning she had to discuss student academic outcomes with principals and help them prepare their annual reports. This involved putting the best possible slant on these outcomes. Couched in the language of annual comparisons, 'this year our students have improved in their year 3 numeracy scores', the whole exercise challenged them all, especially as the basic skills testing regimes and their emphasis on value-adding from years 3 to 5 were meaningless in schools with small enrolments and mobile student populations. Why don't we put as much energy into assessing the social outcomes of schooling? Rural schools would do really well, Greg had exclaimed with some exasperation at a cluster meeting. Why doesn't someone invent a better assessment system to cater for small rural schools? In her old job it was difficult not to think in deficit modes. What a relief to be able to put aside community and personal problems and have a good yarn with teachers about pedagogy and classrooms and kid's learning – makes your heart sing.

Peggy moves on to the Central school 200 kilometres away. To get there she has to drive over the old wooden bridge that is being replaced. She will miss it. Reminds her of some movie and her own childhood. So many things are changing. As she enters town she notices the old abattoir building. When she first saw it a few years ago it had become derelict. It had been bought last year and renovated as a rabbit farm. That didn't last long and she had heard that some Japanese company had since bought it and was going to set up a hydroponic tomato farm. That won't last long either, she predicted. Everyone will get their hopes up about jobs, will move back and then have to pick up the mess made of lives when the business goes broke and the incomes stop yet again.

Like the town, the school enrolments are in decline. The staff photos on the wall of the office reveal that in the 1970s the staff was double what it is today. Today when farmers in the district talk of going into town, they don't mean the town where the school is, even though it is closer. The bank closed two years ago and most of the shops in the main street are boarded up. You can get a cool drink for lunch but it's a struggle to buy a sandwich. Peggy's schedule is so chaotic she usually forgets to eat. This school is one of the ones that battles with attendance. Most of the Indigenous boys have left the school and are in detention centres. It's a local rite of passage. Holding pedagogies are what the school Principal Deb calls her approach. We'll do whatever we can to keep the kids here. All the white families have moved into the regional centre. The drought has killed all the jobs in this area. The only ones who have stayed are the Indigenous families who are unemployed anyway. The drought has had less impact on those on welfare money in this area. The town is full of old age pensioners and Indigenous families. It means we have to rethink what we mean by good school-community relations. We can't ask people in our community to do the things that communities do for other schools.

Deb teaches out of place. Her husband, also a school principal lives and works in another part of the district. Like Trev, she also commutes home on weekends. Peggy estimates that 60% of school principals in the region are working away from their families. It puts a strain on them. You can map the emotional health of staff in the region, she suggests. The further west you go, the worse it gets. Peggy spends much of her time giving emotional support, listening to people think on their feet, sharing strategies and news. Sometimes she feels like a talking gossip columnist. Did you hear Trev got his transfer? Closer to home. Oh, he'll be pleased. Good on him. Peggy leaves feeling like she can do or say little that will help Deb. She's on a sinking ship. Yet Deb has to be positive, put in her reports, come up with strategic plans, report on student outcomes, attendance, and so on, and stay professional. She consoles herself by visiting the Indigenous women in the community. They don't have any magic solutions, but they have lived through hard times before, and as hard as the loss of the Indigenous boys at her school is for Deb, it is even harder for them.

Arriving back at the district office at 8.40pm, Peggy checks in on the boss. Still here? How was your day? It's been a bugger of a day. We had a suicide at one of the river primary schools. One of the dads. Wife left him, farm in receivership. The kindly kids found him hanging from the jungle bars. Luckily his daughter was inside and was kept there. We've had counsellors flown out to help the kids, their parents and the teachers. Apparently he was a popular bloke. Geez. I'm going there tomorrow. I was going to run a session on the Quality Teaching Model at the staff meeting. Probably won't be appropriate. I'll wait and see how they are. Got time for a glass of red? Just for medicinal purposes, I've got a bugger of a toothache.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This facto-fictional narrative is taken from more than 100 interviews conducted in the New England Region of NSW as part of the Rural (Teacher) Education Program – ARC Linkage (2002-2004), conducted jointly by researchers from Charles Sturt University, UNE and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Project members are Prof Bill Green (Project leader, CSU), Dr Norm McCulla (NSW DET), Dr Colin Boylan (CSU), Assoc Prof Cathryn McConaghy (UNE team leader), Ass Prof T.W Maxwell (UNE), Dr Will Letts (CSU), Dr Andrew Wallace (CSU), Prof Bob Meyenn (CSU) and Dr Paul Brock (NSW DET).