

RESEARCHING RURAL-REGIONAL (TEACHER) EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

This special edition of *Education in Rural Australia*, celebrating the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA), presents an opportunity to explore one of the few national projects investigating rural and remote teacher education. The study, *Renewing Rural Teacher Education: Sustaining Schooling for Sustainable Futures* is made even more relevant to the journal as four of the project team members have accepted responsibility for editing *Education in Rural Australia*, the only peer-reviewed academic journal in Australia concerned with rural, regional and remote education.

In 2007 a group of researchers from four Australian universities was awarded an ARC Discovery Grant to undertake a longitudinal study into the nature of successful teacher education strategies aimed at making rural teaching an attractive, long-term career option. Taking up the working title 'TERRAnova', and with an overall aim of identifying and developing sustainable pre-service teacher education programs focusing on recruitment and retention strategies that could make rural teaching a truly worthwhile option for both primary and secondary teachers, the project team members identified the required strategies, as shown in Table 1, to ensure the collection of relevant data.

Research aim	Strategies to achieve research aim
Identification and development of sustainable pre-service teacher education, with a particular focus on recruitment and retention strategies that could make rural teaching a truly worthwhile option for both primary and secondary teachers	Identification and documentation of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • key indicators for success in retaining rural primary and secondary teachers • effective teacher education interventions aimed at promoting rural teaching • successful state-based financial incentive programs aimed at promoting rural teaching

Table 1 Data collection strategies

Using the data, the research team is working to develop a theoretically informed model for rural teacher education that can assist universities, systems and rural communities to attract, support and retain high quality teachers in rural schools.

OVERVIEW

This paper presents descriptive insights into how a national research team located in three Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia), is able to maintain a sustained, cohesive approach to achieving the project's aim. The initial section of the paper introduces each team member prior to discussing the importance of taking a national perspective on rural education. The second section considers the research design and shows how the main objective of the investigation will be achieved. Emerging trends from the quantitative and qualitative data collected in 2008 are revealed in the third section. The discussion in the fourth section centres on how the trends emerging from the collected data requires a reconceptualisation of preparing pre-service teachers for non-metropolitan placements. In doing so, the project's emerging conceptual framework, which emphasises that preparation of teachers for rural and regional appointments needs to be considered beyond the terms and forms of traditional professional practice, is explored.

PROJECT TEAM MEMBERS

In this paper we introduce ourselves as members of the Editorial Team within the context of the larger *TERRAnova* project, which like SPERA, is working to promote education in rural Australia. One of the necessities in forming a research team, with a national perspective, is to ensure that each individual is able to make a contribution to the investigation. As will be demonstrated in this section, each team member has extensive knowledge of rural teacher education in his or her State, although many, due to extensive research over a period of years, are able to contribute insight and knowledge on a national level. Additionally, all team members are engaged at various levels in teacher education with a specific emphasis on rural disadvantage in education. A brief description of the members of the research team shows their shared common interest in rural, regional and remote teacher education, together with their previous work in this area.

Graeme Lock has experience both as a teacher and researcher in rural and regional schools. Since 2003 he has been involved in research in rural and remote school communities in Western Australia, including the investigation of the use of information communication technologies in the curriculum of remote Western Australian schools and the Student Teacher Rural Experience Program. He also participated in a large research project about the well-being of members of the teaching profession, which included a specific examination of teachers in rural locations. In 2006 he was a member of a team which investigated improving teacher practice at a regional school in Victoria by developing a customised ongoing professional learning model from needs identified through performance management.

Simone White worked as a teacher for several years in a western rural NSW school, an experience that has contributed to her commitment to supporting pre-service education students and in helping them understand and appreciate the benefits of rural teaching as a potential career path. Her research interests have focused on teacher education and developing 'new' ways and 'spaces' that position

pre-service and in-service professional learning together, with a particular emphasis on rural communities. To this end, Simone has developed, implemented and sustained an innovative teaching and learning model for urban student teachers to work with rural school communities. Simone has produced two DVDs both aimed at improving rural education and rural leadership. In recent years she has been working with the Victorian Department of Education and the Country Education Project to improve leadership and professional learning in rural schools through cluster teams. Simone is currently co-authoring the book *Teaching in Rural Communities* with Jo-Anne Reid, and is also co-editor of the book *Learning to Lead: Leading across effective small schools* (Department of Education and Training, in print).

Maxine Cooper has spent the past 14 years researching equity and diversity in education and teacher education programs, including workplace learning, pre-service teachers, beginning teachers and their mentors in professional learning communities of practice in urban and in rural communities. She has recently prepared a DVD on supporting new teachers in rural and remote settings in two Queensland remote area communities. How new teachers are educated and inducted into the profession of teaching and how they respond to the diverse social and cultural needs of students in their classrooms has been a developing area of interest for her, arising from her previous research in diversity and classroom practices, teacher induction and mentoring, and professional learning for teachers in urban and rural settings.

Wendy Hastings has considerable experience in rural schools and teacher education, having taught in rural schools and worked as a consultant in Western NSW for 17 years before commencing a university career. Since 2002 she has been involved in research on exemplary mathematics teaching outcomes in rural schools, supporting pre-service teachers to explore teaching opportunities and enhancing learning outcomes for students in rural and isolated communities. Other rural education-based research has concentrated on exploring co-operating teachers in rural primary and EC settings, perceptions of professional experience as a source of professional learning, outcomes for rural pre-service teachers undertaking professional experience programs in metropolitan schools, and the development of programs to enhance the learning opportunities of pre-service teachers in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

We four are the team members who have taken up a new role as Editors of this journal – extending our commitment to ensuring that the scholarly community focussed on rural education in Australia retains a high quality and sustainable research journal. In addition to the editorial team, the *TERRAnova* research team also includes Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid. **Bill Green** has experience both as a researcher and a teacher in rural and regional Australia, having begun his secondary school teaching in rural-regional Western. Since 1998 he has worked strategically to research and theorise teacher education in Australia as an intellectual project. Most recently a member of two ARC Discovery grants and three ARC Linkage projects, one strand of Bill's work has explicitly focused on education in and for rural Australia. Bill has a substantial publication record, is a formally designated Key Researcher and Senior Research Fellow in a CSU Strategic Research Centre: Research in Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) and is coordinating a

Faculty research focus on Education for Rural-Regional Sustainability. He is currently Professor of Education in the Faculty of Education at Charles Sturt University and Strategic Research Professor in RIPPLE.

Jo-Anne Reid was an English teacher, Education Officer and Advisory Teacher in the Curriculum Branch of the WA Department of Education, where she had responsibility for supporting beginning teachers in rural District High Schools around the state. She has worked in teacher education since the 1980s and in inland universities since 1996 (Ballarat, UNE, CSU) - locations where the disadvantages of geographical and social disadvantage are manifest in the sorts of cultural capital many student teachers are able to draw on as they prepare for careers in teaching. She is also a key researcher in the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education (RIPPLE) at Charles Sturt University.

The demand for a national perspective on rural education is explained in terms of: the need to improve the economic and social performance of non-metropolitan communities, so that the wealth and competitiveness of Australia as a whole is maximised (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005); the current context of an increasing downturn in rural economies (Alston & Kent, 2006; Lockie & Bourke, 2001) is addressed and recognition that Australia requires sound research-based knowledge of what effective strategies are already in place (as well as what strategies have failed to achieve the desired outcome) in the preparation of teachers to support rural communities in these challenging times.

Despite the importance of the rural sector within Australia's overall economic and social development, throughout the country employment authorities have struggled to attract and retain teachers and other professionals to rural and remote areas in Australia (Green & Reid 2004; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004; Roberts 2003; Vinson 2002). Furthermore, the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE, 1999) report indicates that teacher supply and demand projections in the future suggest an expected national shortfall in the order of approximately two percent. Currently, states such as NSW, WA, SA, Queensland and Victoria are all experiencing significant difficulties in staffing rural and isolated schools (MCEETYA 2001, Halsey 2005). Thus, the expected shortfall coupled with the present difficulty in attracting teachers to rural and remote areas suggests there will be major problems in staffing for many rural and remote schools.

If universities are to enhance the nation's chances of competing in a global market, then attention should be focussed on improving the educational experiences and opportunities associated with rural communities and on making rural teaching an attractive and long-term career option. While there are currently a number of State- and university-based financial incentive programs for rural teaching, the disparity of these schemes as well as their overall effectiveness are issues that require investigation. That is, there is a need to present a national picture of these schemes, work on which has already commenced (White, Reid, Lock, Hastings, Cooper & Green, 2008). Gathering this information, together with data on the effectiveness of the various schemes, should enable the development of a national picture on rural teaching incentive schemes, thereby enabling education jurisdictions and universities to develop enhanced programs based on these findings.

This national approach to rural teacher education builds on other related studies in this area including the (NSW) Rural [Teacher] Education Project (R[T]EP) (2002-2005), Halsey, (2005, 2006), and Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell and Pegg (2006). The research team is also cognisant of evidence that some rural schools and communities have good teacher retention rates (i.e. more than three years), and of targeted mentoring programs and leadership approaches in some schools that are beginning to produce extended tenure of staff (Williams, 2004). However, this evidence tends to be limited, often sporadic and anecdotal; resulting in the need for systematic, national research on the actual success of these various incentives designed to attract rural teachers and research with those school communities where teacher retention is high.

In summary, this project, conceived as a national partnership between teacher education researchers with a history of institutional commitment to rural education, is constructing a national picture of successful strategies for preparing, attracting, and retaining high-quality teachers for rural and remote schools across Australia.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research question and the design have been integrated by using a strong and strategically-focused mixed-method approach (Cresswell, 2003) to data collection and analysis. The team will draw on both quantitative and qualitative procedures including large-scale (state→national) surveys and small-scale in-depth interviews, as well as local community/school ethnographies. The longitudinal nature of the investigation will provide a rich, valuable set of data by “following” the student teachers through their pre-service education with a particular ‘rural’ focus into their early-career experience as teachers who take up appointments in rural schools. The ethnographic studies will draw from a broad range of views: from pre-service teachers, parents, teachers, community members, school leaders, policy makers and teacher educators at the local level, and combine these within and between states, for a national analysis and review.

Overall, the main objective will be achieved through the identification and documentation of: key indicators for success in retaining rural primary and secondary teachers, successful teacher education ‘interventions’ aimed at promoting rural teaching, and successful state-based financial ‘incentive’ programmes aimed at promoting rural teaching. The next section of this paper will explore some of emerging trends identified in the data collected during 2008.

EMMERGING TRENDS IN THE DATA

Two previous studies by Halsey (2005, 2006) provide useful background information prior to discussing the data collected from this project in 2008. In 2005 Halsey presented a report in which he discussed the size, scope and issues associated with pre-service country teaching in Australia. Among the findings of this research was the stark contrast between practicum placement locations offered by metropolitan- and rural-based universities: the former offering one rural placement for every 25 urban placements while the latter offered two rural placements to each non-rural placement. He also found that cost pressures, on both pre-service teachers and universities, significantly influenced the availability of non-metropolitan

practicum placements. Halsey's findings resulted in a number of policy framing and operational recommendations that were aimed at expanding support for and improving operational aspects of pre-service country teacher placement programs.

Two key recommendations of direct relevance to this project are:

- that universities with teacher education programs be strongly encouraged to develop policies to increase significantly the number of pre-service country teaching placements;
- that metropolitan universities and key stakeholders be strongly encouraged and provided with incentives to progressively and significantly increase the proportion of their teacher education cohort that participates in a country pre-service placement.

The 2005 study was followed by a closer investigation into costs associated with participation in rural practicums. In this study, Halsey (2006) found that pre-service teachers faced out-of-pocket expenses of up to \$2500.00, a cost which he identified as a significant deterrent to undertaking a rural practicum. As well as losing income from part-time jobs, pre-service teachers on rural placements also faced paying double housing costs, together with transport and communication costs. He estimated that, for rural practicums, pre-service teachers nationally were paying \$27 million each year. Against this background regarding the quantum of rural practicum placements and the disincentive of costs associated with rural placements, the initial data obtained by the *TERRAnova* team provides interesting reading.

To obtain data on teacher education and 'interventions' aimed at promoting rural teaching, a survey was developed and placed online on the *TERRAnova* website. Final year students in Australian universities were contacted, through ACDE, to make them aware of the survey and that should they complete it their anonymity would be assured. The survey contained four sections: socio-biographical characteristics of survey respondents, a description of the incentive scheme, the impact of the scheme on developing skills and knowledge about living and teaching in rural/remote locations, and comments on pre-service country experience or placement. During 2008 the research received 105 responses to the survey. Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of responses to some of the questions from the first two sections. The following brief discussion is based on a preliminary, cursory analysis of some of the data; sophisticated statistical analysis has yet to be attempted.

Question	Responses (%)	
Q1. What was the nature of the incentive scheme or practicum you participated in?	University-based: 73 State-based: 18 Both: 9	
Q8. Your Gender	Male : 21 Female: 79	
Q9. Your Age	21-25: 70 26-30: 7 31-35: 8 36-40: 7	41-45: 5 46-50: 1 51 and over: 2
Q10. Area in which you mostly lived prior to commencing preservice teacher education:	Metropolitan: 40 Rural: 60	
Q11. Do you have any dependents?	Yes: 14 No: 86	
Q12. Did you undertake your rural teaching experience in your hometown?	Yes: 25 No: 75	
Q14. Did you have a paid job when you undertook your rural practicum/experience?	Yes: 48 No: 52	
Q15. Where do you currently live?	Metropolitan: 37 Rural/regional: 58 Remote: 5	

Table 2 Socio-biographical characteristics

The overwhelming majority of respondents were females, with no dependents, aged between 21 and 25 years. Almost three-quarters had participated in a university-based scheme only, with the same proportion not undertaking their practicum in their hometown. Most of the survey participants lived in rural locations prior to commencing their pre-service teacher education courses with a clear majority living in non-metropolitan areas while studying to be a teacher. A slight majority did not have paid employment during their rural practicum.

Question	Responses (%)
Q18. Would you have applied for a rural practicum without the assistance provided by the incentive scheme?	Yes: 69 No: 25 No response: 6
Q20. Were you provided with a briefing session prior to undertaking the rural practicum/experience?	Yes: 40 No: 53 No response: 7
Q21. Was the briefing session valuable?	Very valuable: 19 Of some value: 22 Of no value: 5 No response: 6 Not applicable: 48
Q22. Were you provided with a de-briefing session after undertaking the rural practicum/experience?	Yes: 30 No: 64 No response: 6
Q23. Was this de-briefing session valuable?	Very valuable: 12 Of some value: 13 Of no value: 5 No response: 7 Not applicable: 63
Q24. Did participation in the incentive scheme encourage you to apply for a rural/remote teaching appointment?	Yes: 67 No: 27 No response: 6
Q25. How far did you travel (one-way) from your university for your country practicum/experience?	0-200 : 29 201-400: 19 401-600: 17 601-800: 6 801-1000: 4 1001-1500: 6 1501-2000: 5 over 2000: 8 No response: 6
Q26. How did you travel to your country placement?	Bus/train: 11 Own car: 67 Air: 10 Friend's car: 4 None of the above: 2 No response: 6
Q28. Did you have to pay for accommodation in the location in which you undertook the rural placement incentive scheme?	Yes: 46 No: 48 No response: 6
Q29. Did you have to pay for accommodation in your home base (where you reside when attending university) while participating in the rural placement incentive scheme?	Yes: 57 No: 37 No response: 6

Table 3 Features of the incentive schemes

While responses indicated the positive impact of the incentives schemes on encouraging application for rural/remote teaching positions after graduation, some concern can be expressed by the relative lack of briefing and de-briefing sessions. Nonetheless, for those schemes that had either or both of these sessions, the great majority of respondents found them to be at least 'of some value'. The responses that indicate a relatively limited influence of the incentive scheme on applying for rural/remote locations probably need to be considered in relation to the location in which the participants lived both prior to and during their pre-service teacher education courses (the majority indicating a rural/regional residential location).

Of some concern to the researchers, particularly given the comments by Halsey (2005, 2006) about the cost pressures associated with undertaking rural practicums, is the high number of respondents who had to pay for accommodation while on their rural practicum and the higher number who had to continue paying for accommodation in their home base. Indeed, 43% of the respondents had to cover residential costs for both their accommodation at their practicum location and their home base. Further, most of the rural experiences occurred within six hundred kilometres of the respondents' residences, which might explain the popularity of using their own motor vehicles to travel to the country location.

Section three of the survey asked respondents to rate the degree to which they had acquired knowledge and skills as a result of participating in the rural placement incentive scheme. This list of knowledge and skills related to both teaching and living in rural/remote locations. Examples of the former include the development of appropriate teaching/learning strategies, managing student behaviour and staff-student relationships in school, while the latter included items such as community expectations of teachers outside school hours, participation in community activities (sport, clubs, etc) and development of own living skills. Respondents used a 6 point Likert scale: 1 not applicable; 2 strongly disagree; 3 disagree; 4 neutral; 5 agree; 6 strongly agree.

Preliminary analysis shows overwhelmingly positive responses to these items, with mean scores ranging from 4.0 (support provided for teachers in rural/remote locations) to 5.2 (characteristic of students in rural/remote schools). At the time of writing this paper the research team had not completed analysis to determine if statistical relationships exist between any of the variables.

The second category of data being collected relates to identifying and documenting key indicators for success in retaining rural primary and secondary teachers. This data phase involves site visits (after obtaining the required university and state departments of education ethics clearance) to collect data through semi-structured interviews. Three categories of interviewees were identified by the research team: graduate and newly appointed teachers, principals, experienced teachers, and parents and community members.

The interview questions were designed to obtain information on issues such as reasons for seeking a rural appointment, identification of support for newly appointed teachers, community involvement, recruitment strategies, and reasons why the school has a high teacher retention rate. By the end of 2008 team members had visited six schools (and communities) in four states. The number of people interviewed varied from school to school, and was dependent on school size and community member availability.

Themes emerging from these interview data include school leadership, support for teachers within the school, on-going community support and teacher involvement in the community. Teachers noted the importance of a strong, supportive and strategic principal. They commented on being aware of the principal's interest in them, particularly the concern about settling into a new community and school. Teachers also referred to the positive impact of being mentored, yet the researchers observed that there was typically no formal mentoring program in place in any of the schools visited. The importance of community

involvement was noted by both newly appointed and experienced teachers as contributing to developing a sense of “belonging” to the town.

Community members recognised the importance of providing on-going support for teachers, with the latter expressing appreciation for the way in which they were made to feel welcome. A common observation was the importance placed by the community in supporting the school and vice versa; schools often being the site of community events. Thus, the intertwining of school and community appears to be mutually beneficial and contributing to developing among teachers a sense of being part of something worthwhile. One aspect of community life that appeared prominent in teachers’ lives in these rural communities was involvement in community sport. It was through sport that many teachers made deliberate and more subtle connections with school and community members. Teachers’ responses were typically positive when they described the connections that made through sport. However, access to other forms of community interaction – such as theatre and the arts more broadly – was not always available.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although data collection is only in its infancy, the emerging trends indicate that the issues identified by Halsey (2005, 2006) seem to persist. Therefore, it is important to reconceptualise a way forward, to rethink teacher education relating to the preparation of pre-service teachers for non-metropolitan appointments and to address the difficulty in attracting and retaining staff in rural and remote schools. This rethinking of teacher education was paramount in the *TERRAnova* team’s development of the project’s conceptual framework.

Building on the work of the Rural [Teacher] Education Project (R[T]EP), an ARC Linkage Project funded from 2002-2005, led by Bill Green and involving researchers at CSU, UNE and the NSWDET, the development of the conceptual framework started by acknowledging that preparation of teachers for rural and regional appointments needs to be considered beyond the terms and forms of traditional professional practice. In particular, we argue that pre-service teachers should understand the notion of *rural social space*. That is, pre-service teachers need to develop the social capital (in addition to symbolic educational and cultural capital) to enable them to be an effective educator, and community member in a rural setting. In developing this social capital, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators, may find value in working with a model of rural social space such as the one we have developed as a multi-faceted, historically and spatially situated phenomenon that cannot usefully conceptualised in a unitary manner, or generalised across time and space.

Indeed, rural social space is complex, contradictory and diverse. Consider the vastly different characteristics of rural areas in terms of health, wealth, age, housing, employment, ethnicity, race and culture. Developing understanding of rurality is a key to preparing pre-service teachers for a successful career in rural locations. This nature of this development is neatly explained by Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock and Hastings (2008) who wrote:

As we strive to understand what keeps people in rural communities, and the nature of the strongest forms of knowledge that can serve as capital for rural

teaching, we are developing a theoretical argument for understanding rurality today – and for coming to know and prepare for teaching in rural communities ... this is emerging for us in terms of the interrelation of three key factors: Industry, Environment and Indigeneity, which we see as connected both in practice and in place. It is the *practice* of place that provides and produces social space. The way in which these factors interact and interrelate suggests that there may be ways for rural social space to be rethought and represented so that we do not produce symbolic deficit and cultural cringe (p. 6).

Thus, the conceptual framework, as shown in figure one, encapsulates the complex nature of rural social space as ‘practiced place’.

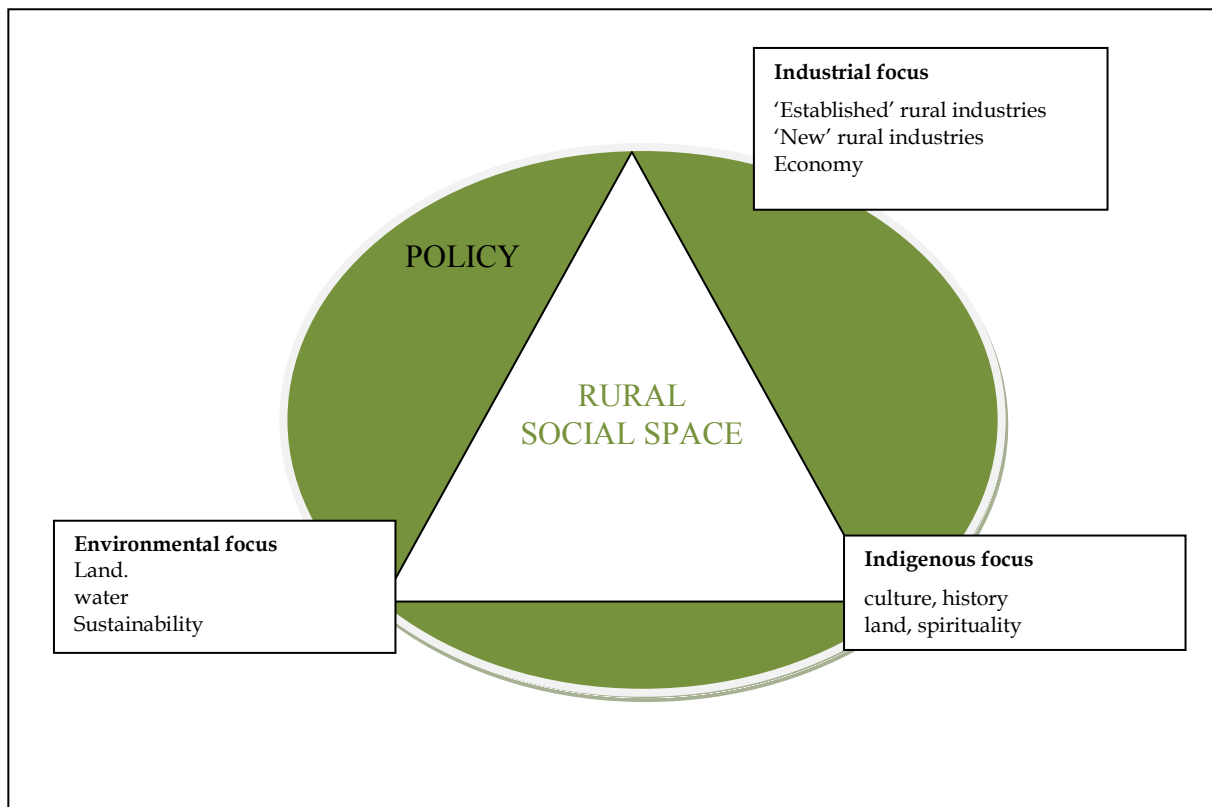


Figure 1 Rural social space (Reid et al., 2008)

This model of rural social space provides the research team with the framework within which to address their investigation. Exploring the concept of practised rural social space might provide some answers to the development of effective rural/remote pre-service teacher education programs, together with the identification of strategies to attract and retain teachers to rural/remote locations.

CONCLUSION

National research projects concerned with rural and remote teacher education are rare. This special anniversary issue of *Education in Rural Australia* presents an opportunity to increase awareness of the 'TERRAnova' Project, which is investigating strategies that attract and retain teachers to rural and remote schools; a problem faced by Australian education systems since the nineteenth century. This

paper introduces and outlines the project. The research team was introduced, with four of them identified as the new editors of this journal, drawing attention to the team members' collective knowledge and experience in rural education. The importance of forming a national perspective on rural teacher education was emphasised, particularly in relation its impact on Australia's economic and social performance. The role of pre-service teacher education in improving this economic and social performance was discussed, together with demonstrating how this project builds on previous scholarship in rural education. In the second half of the paper, the mixed-method research design was discussed, prior to revealing how the main research objective will be achieved. Trends emerging from the quantitative and qualitative data collected in 2008 were identified, with the comment being made that these findings demonstrated a need to rethink pre-service teacher education programs in preparing graduate teachers for non-metropolitan placements. This rethinking was made apparent in the project's emerging conceptual framework, with its emphasis on rural social space. The project continues...

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