

REASONS AND MOTIVATIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERS WHO APPLY FOR RURAL, REGIONAL AND REMOTE LOCATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Evidence suggests that there are significant difficulties associated with the attraction and retention of appropriately qualified, high quality teachers and educational leaders (e.g., principals) for rural¹, regional and remote locations in Australia. Further, educational leadership in these areas carries complex demands, and educational leaders are often under prepared for the work and demands expected of them. Why then, do educational leaders apply for R3 positions? Herein, we use qualitative reports from 426 school leaders employed in rural Australia for an average length of 10.6 years (SD = 7.3 years) and frequency data to identify the most common reasons and motivations for applying to work as an educational leader in a R3 context. Given the leaders' length of R3 employment, we argue that examining their reasons and motivations for applying can assist in understanding how to enhance the recruitment of educational leaders for rural, regional and remote areas. Further, by examining reasons and motivations, policy makers and administrators may benefit from the findings of this research about why educational leaders choose to work in country areas.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is complex, contested and frequently a catalyst for extensive theoretical and pragmatic debate and discussion about what blend of leadership skills, knowledge and understandings are required to optimise student learning, and 'deliver on' societal wide expectations of schooling like internationally competitive literacy and numeracy scores (Anderson et al., 2010; Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006; MacGilchrist, Myers & Reed, 2004; Robinson, 2007). Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom, (2004, p.1) have concluded from their extensive work that "[school] leadership not only matters: it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning". In rural, regional and remote (R3) contexts, educational leaders are also a rich source of intellectual capital and therefore are uniquely placed to contribute towards other priorities like capacity building and sustainability (Anderson, Davis, Douglas, Lloyd, Niven, & Thiele, 2010; Cocklin & Dibden, 2005; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009; Mulford, 2003).

Starr and White (2008) in their rural schools research found understanding context is crucial to appreciating the complexities and challenges of rural principalship. Their research also foregrounded that constantly changing systems policies and priorities impact on how rural principals come to understand and then enact their leadership role.

Blackmore (2004) has argued similarly and has also underscored how leadership effectiveness is sensitive to contextual diversity:

1. In this article, rural, regional and remote are denoted by R3.

Individuals who exercise leadership in one context may not do so readily in another, and particular contexts produce dominant images and constructs of what constitutes good leadership (p.268).

Given the importance of school leadership, one concern for Australian R3 schools is the smaller pool of applicants for school leadership positions (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore & Sachs, 2005). Of further concern is that principals are often under prepared for these leadership positions, which are highly demanding roles (Clarke, & Wildy, 2004 & 2010; Drummond & Halsey, 2013).

Perhaps for the aforementioned reason, principals in country areas are more likely to leave the school system than their counterparts in capital cities (Gates, Ringel, Santibañez, Guarino, Ghosh-Dastidar & Brown, 2006). This illustrates a further problem with R3 school principals – their retention by schools. Together, the lower attraction and retention rates of school leaders in rural, regional and remote areas pose a challenge for the sustainability of these areas.

As Ban, Drahnak-Faller and Towers (2003) found from their research on recruitment and retention for human service and community development organisations (such as education), motivation is a critical aspect of recruitment and “the central debate is over the relative importance of intrinsic motivators (mission of the organisation and nature of the work, chance for growth and self-development) and extrinsic motivators (primarily pay and benefits)” (p.144). Despite this, little is presently known about why school educators decide to accept a R3 position, and what kinds of motivations drive their choice to work as a leader in a rural school. By understanding the reasons and motivations for accepting R3 leadership positions, we may add to our knowledge of what attracts and retains educators in these roles.

Before proceeding further, a few comments on rural, regional and remote locations are required. In Australia, locational determinations for schooling provision are essentially based upon a blend of size of population centre and distance from either the capital city or a major regional centre (Jones, 2000, pp.12-17). However, there is often variation between and within jurisdictions. For example, in South Australia, a rurality allowance for government schools commences for schools located 80kms or more from the General Post Office; for non-government schools, the distance is 50kms. In contrast to quantitative metrics, qualitative/descriptive definitions of rural, regional and remote locations focus on the essences of places and spaces. Put another way: “The notions of movement, flow from place to place, the ways in which places are connected by histories rather than geographies, and the idea put forward by Deleuze that place is an issue of becoming and identification, all constitute interesting problematics for [an] analysis [and understanding] of rural...” (McConaghy, 2002, p.14).

Numeric definitions of rural, regional and remote locations, while they may convey a sense of precision, do not capture the immeasurable dimensions of contexts, the lived, the felt, the relational and more. Consequently for the research reported in this article, respondents were invited to define their location according to the definition of their employer.

The present study sought to examine the reasons and motivation for applying to work as an educational leader in a rural, regional or remote location. Further, the research examined the common themes among the reasons and motivations of school leaders in these locations.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 426 R3 school principals. These were a subset of a larger sample of 683 participants who responded to a national leadership questionnaire, who had served as educational leaders in a non-urban location for an average of 10.6 years (SD = 7.3 years). Inclusion in the present study was predicated on participants providing a qualitative response to the question: *briefly describe why you applied for a rural/regional/remote leadership position?*

Responses

Survey participants provided responses which ranged from a single word (e.g., 'promotion', 'lifestyle') to a large amount of descriptive information - for example:

'I have a passion and commitment to rural education and I too often see rural schools without sustained contributions from leaders. They are a whistle stop for ambitious people who often practice seagull leadership. Fly in, squawk a lot, put crap about and fly away quickly. I was sick of being in schools as a teacher where this sort of thing seemed to be the norm. Leadership of country schools should be about the needs of the community and their young people and not the needs of the upwardly mobile professional.'

RESULTS

The first author read and considered the 426 items of data from respondents guided by a blended phenomenological and grounded approach to text analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1994). Both approaches are of the qualitative research tradition but there are important, yet complementary, differences- hence the decision to use a blend of each. As Starks and Trinidad (2007) state, "the goal of phenomenology is to study how people make meaning of their lived experience... and grounded theory develops explanatory theories of basic social processes studied in context" (p.1373).

An analysis of all the comments about what leaders view positively about the characteristics and opportunities of R3 contexts generated 19 categories of comments. The categories emerged over the duration of reading and working to identify the reason or reasons for applying for a R3 leadership position. The categories were not predetermined. Statements from respondents were not forced to fit into them. In some cases, a comment comprised more than one reason such as "promotion and lifestyle for myself and young family" and "interest in Indigenous education and teaching in remote schools", and was therefore allocated to more than one category as appropriate. In other instances, the context which 'wrapped' a response gave voice to the reason- "[the] situation allows a leader to use more initiative and independence in order to respond to and make changes to improve student learning and school culture". Put another way, the responses of the participants were read and re-read to distil the essential messages (Bernstein, 1971) being conveyed and portrayed by them.

Table 1 shows the categories, the comment tally for each and 2 or 3 examples to illustrate what respondents wrote which led to the category descriptor.

Table 1: Comment categories, total number of responses in the category (Tally) and Selected comments.

Why?	Tally	Selected Comments
Career	31	I have always wanted to be a principal; career progression; to step up to another position to make the most of my education and improve the financial circumstances of my family
Promotion	45	Promotion; increased promotional opportunity; wanted my own substantive principalship- would have gone anywhere to achieve this
Lifestyle	36	Love the country- the people the landscape the lifestyle; preferred it as personal/professional lifestyle and location; the people attracted me to the country lifestyle
Family	39	Family life; moved to regional area for personal/family reasons; an opportunity to have a family life better than that in the city
Rural/country preference	64	Like being in the country; I prefer to live in rural areas; prefer rural but also position became available in location that matched husband's work

Fresh start	10	Nobody knew me in the country; marriage break up, needed to move
Indigenous education	7	Interest in Indigenous education and experience teaching in remote schools; seeking broader experience as educator in an Aboriginal community
Childhood/family background	9	I spent a lot of time in the country as a kid-Dad was a principal; grew up in isolated area, felt drawn back to profession in these areas
Escape	3	Hated the idea of living in the city; congestion and inequality in the urban areas; I wanted to move away from Sydney
Money	7	Promotion- financial consideration; to step up to another position to make the most of my education and improve the financial circumstances of my family
School size/type	19	Size of the school was the greatest factor, as I wanted to work in a small school; I knew and liked the particular school I applied for; I was working in Sydney and the opportunity came up to lead a central(k-12) school- I had a young family it seemed perfect; leadership opportunity coupled with classroom teaching
Make a difference	32	Wanted to be part of the solution not the problem; I believed I had something to offer public education; I believed I could make a more significant contribution across a school rather than a classroom
Opportunity	38	Opportunity to develop new skills; an opportunity to work in a completely different area ie lifestyle community; it was a dream to be a teaching principal as I grew up in a small community
People and community	23	Community values; my community; thought I would like working in a small community; quality of life and being part of a small community
Challenge	25	New challenge I felt I was better suited to admin than teaching; I enjoyed the challenge and the opportunity of working closely with the community; challenge of new learning, community partnerships
Invitation/encouraged	15	I was asked by the principal to apply; upon encouragement by line manager; it was suggested that I do so- I then considered that I could make a difference in my site if I took a leadership role
Leadership	27	Deeper leadership opportunity; great opportunity to become a leader; wanted the challenge of leadership in a small community
It's home/I live here	30	I live here; was currently living in a regional centre; near the location of my choice for residence; home area and just happened
Employment	14	Already a coordinator at the site- faced displacement if I did not win the leadership position; an opportunity to get back into the workforce after motherhood; permanency

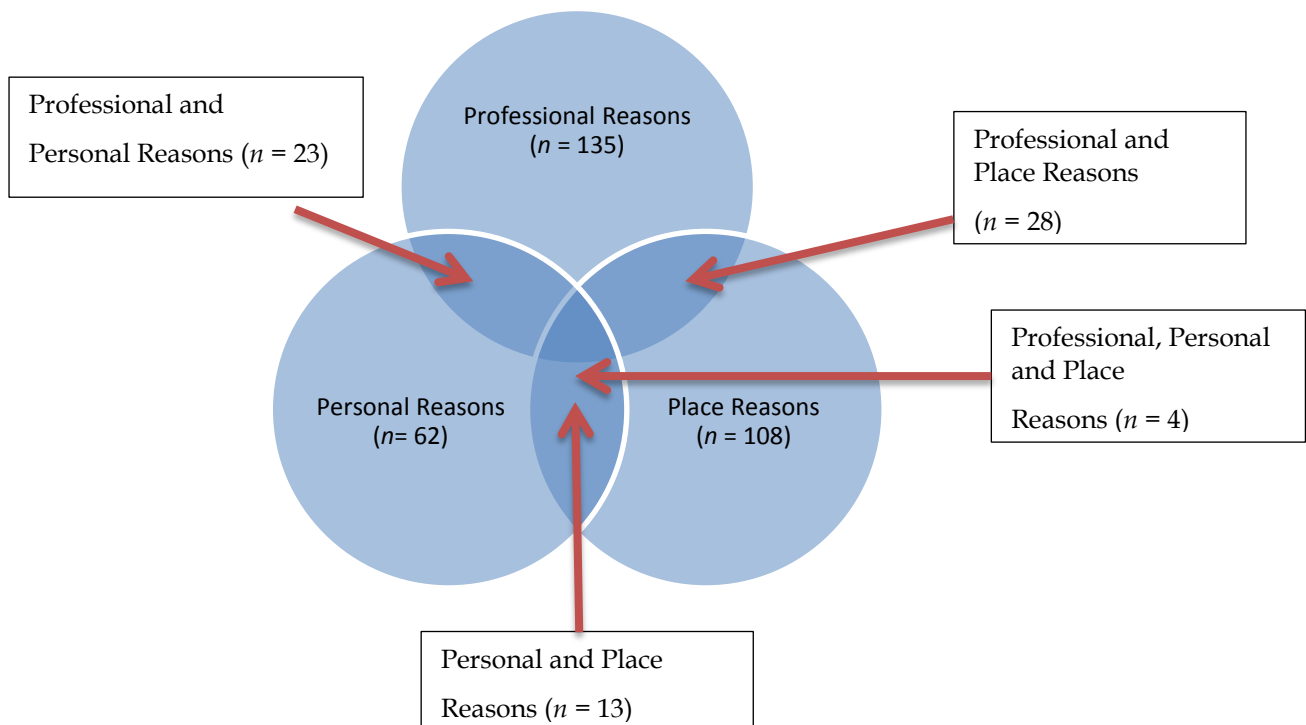
CLUSTERING OF REASONS: PROFESSIONAL, PERSONAL AND PLACE

Following the initial categorisation of responses, the first author then condensed these categories into three domains: personal, professional and place. As for the first process of considering inputs from respondents, the 3 domains arose from numerous rounds of thinking about each reason and what seemed to be the primary or fundamental underpinning of it. The domains are shown in table 2. Professional reasons for applying for a country school include promotion, income, school size and school type. Personal reasons include making a fresh start after, for example, a marriage or relationship break up, to enhance family relations and improve lifestyle opportunities and for some, a country position was returning home, either to their place of origin or one similar. Place preferences include lifestyle and opportunities to make a contribution to a community and more widely. As stated above, reasons for applying for a R3 leadership position at times were composite in nature and this is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. The detailed tracking of the 426 respondent comments to produce frequency data for each category of reasons and intersections of them, significantly helps to 'fill out the picture' about why leaders apply for R3 positions, was undertaken by the second author.

Table 2: Categories as represented by professional, personal and place domains.

Professional Reasons	Personal Reasons	Place Reasons
Career	Family	Lifestyle
Promotion	Fresh start	Country preference
Indigenous education	Escape	People and community
School size and type	Invited/ Encouraged	Opportunity
Make a difference	It's home	Childhood experiences
Challenge	Money	
Leadership		
Employment		

Figure 1: Overlap between the three domains of application reason.



NATURE OF REASONS: PRAGMATISM, OPPORTUNISM AND IDEALISM

In addition to identifying and then categorising the reasons school leaders chose to apply for their position, the first author also attempted to identify the motivation for the application in those instances where enough detail was available to do so, and within the limitation of the data type. An analysis of the comments within each of the groups shows there appear to be at least three variations in motivational framing that respondents held in relation to why they applied for a R3 leadership position. The remainder did not have enough detail to be coded into motivational categories.

The first motivational theme to emerge was pragmatism, akin to 'the thing to do at this stage of my career and life; the thing to try and capitalise on at this time'. Comments such as "faced displacement if I did not win the leadership position", "decided to apply for it because there was less travelling", "lived in the region", "limited positions available in city schools" and, "availability of position" are illustrative of pragmatism as used here. At least 188 responses displayed some level of pragmatism.

The second motivational framing in relation to applying for a R3 leadership position was opportunism - here used in terms of 'taking action may well open up options that would otherwise remain closed or that suit my circumstances'. Respondents' comments of this kind include "great opportunity to become a leader", "opportunities exist that don't occur in metropolitan settings", "to access a promotional position", "better lifestyle for self and family", "an opportunity to get back into the workforce after motherhood", and "prefer rural but also position became available in location that matched husband's work area". Seventy six responses displayed opportunism.

The third motivation that came through in the comments was idealism, in essence comments which reflect challenge and a desire, an aspiration to help improve the lot of rural students and communities. Comments such as "I have a passion for trying to ensure that students in remote places gain the best possible education", "wanted to be part of the solution not the problem", "to make a difference to student outcomes", and "I wanted to use my experience to help young teachers" are examples of idealism. As for the reasons people apply for country appointments, in some instances there appears to be a blending of motivations, as illustrated in "I am from a rural area, and felt that I could make a difference", "promotion and desire for challenge" and "Department of Education restructuring and deep commitment to students with disabilities". Eighty responses were coded as idealistic.

Table 3 shows the reasons and motivations underlying the application of educational leaders to country positions arranged as a matrix for those respondents for whom both a reason and a motivation could be discerned from their answer. As can be seen from the table there are high levels of pragmatic responses in every category; however, a high number of idealistic professional responses were also observed.

Table 3: Reasons and Motivations Matrix (RaMM)

Reason Motivation	Professional	Personal	Place	Blend
Pragmatism	59	34	26	25
Opportunism	19	10	12	14
Idealism	33	1	14	11
Blend	13	2	3	6

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the self-reported reasons and motivations for rural, regional and remote educational leaders to have applied for their position. Substantive and aspiring educational leaders appear to apply for R3 positions for professional reasons, personal reasons, place preferencing reasons, or a blend there-of. Furthermore, their reasons appear to be largely pragmatic, opportunistic or idealistic in nature. Most commonly, respondents reported pragmatic or idealistic professional reasons for pursuing leadership positions in country areas, followed by pragmatic personal reasons and pragmatic place reasons.

Importantly, the cohort that participated in the study were predominantly long-standing principals in country areas, providing insight into why those principals who stay in these areas first were attracted to country school leadership. By understanding that many educational leaders in country areas who choose to remain report the aforementioned three reasons and three underlying motivations, educational policy makers and administrators may gain important insights into the kinds of reasons and motivations that may support school leaders in R3 contexts.

A valuable outcome from the present study is the possibility that the three reason domains and the three underlying motivations comprising the Reasons and Motivations Matrix (RaMM) may be used by marketers and employing school authorities in an attempt to attract successful applicants who are likely to pursue lengthy tenures in country educational leadership positions, which are traditionally difficult to fill and retain staff in (Barty, Thomson, Blackmore & Sachs, 2005; Gates, Ringel, Santibañez, Guarino, Ghosh-Dastidar & Brown, 2006). Appealing to the reasons and motivations that successful R3 school leaders report as being responsible for their initial applications may help to ensure similar qualities amongst future applicants. The RaMM may also be used by those considering applying for R3 school leadership positions to reflect on their reasons for applying (or not) in deep, disaggregated as well as aggregated ways.

The present study joins a large and growing body of literature aimed at illuminating and remedying issues of inequity in rural education (Curtis, 2011; Drummond, 2013; Drummond & Halsey, 2013; Drummond, Halsey & van Breda, 2011; Drummond, Halsey & van Breda 2012a; 2012b; Halsey, 2011; Lock, Reid & White, 2011). As rural areas are critical for food security and other 'basics for life' (Homer-Dixon, 2006; Diamond, 2005; Pretty, 2002; Ehrlich, Ehrlich & Daily, 1993), the importance for rural areas in national and global issues in the 21st century cannot be overestimated. In order for country areas to flourish however, it is a necessary for them to have essential human services, such as schools, and leaders are integral to the quality of education available to students and communities more broadly.

The data presented and analysed in this paper shows that attracting and retaining leaders for R3 schools is multi-dimensional in terms of reasons and motivations and in essence, pushes back against the tendency to rely on a suite of incentives, usually expressed as a quantum of dollars. The reasons and motivations of the informants for the research reveal a more nuanced mix of factors 'than just money' which in turn enriches the possibilities available to those ultimately responsible for ensuring that educational leaders are appointed to R3 schools.

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