

CONNECTIONS OF PLACE AND GENERATION: WOMEN TEACHERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS IN NSW

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project that explores the stories of women teachers in four rural public high schools in northwest New South Wales. It has been driven by a curiosity about women's workplace experiences in schools with a focus on career progression, care, leadership and mentoring. Using qualitative in-depth interviews the project draws from feminist poststructuralism and uses analytical tools based on narrative inquiry and situated knowledges. The findings will contribute to a dialogue on reciprocity, generational teachers, gender inequity, professional autonomy and agency.

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on a study of the lived experiences of twenty-two women teachers in four rural high schools in Northern NSW, Australia. The project involved qualitative interviews and revealed a discourse of relationships among women marked by affirmation, reciprocity and nurturing. While the women's stories all offered this shared narrative, there was also evidence of multiplicity in their diverse lives and busy work places.

There were three primary findings from this study; the first was the generational connection to rural and regional place. The data indicated that more than 80 per cent of the women grew up in rural and regional areas and a significant number of them had followed parental careers into teaching. Secondly the data suggested that one's educational background and experiences with teachers shaped the type of teacher these women aimed to be themselves and their views on mentoring. Thirdly the majority of the women expressed concern about the lack of support for women's progression in teaching and a tendency for male teachers to more likely to be accelerated through the promotional ranks. While the concern about gendered inequity and variable degrees of agency in the work place was expressed by the majority of the women interviewed it is also important to note that it was not unanimous with three women adamant that their careers were unaffected by their gender. Despite the varying issues raised through the interviews, it should be noted that these women also found it rewarding to be in the teaching profession and to work in the rural communities.

This paper will contribute to the current dialogue on the rural high school as a workplace, as well as offering a snap shot of the personal lives of a dedicated group of teachers. Conscious of the risks of idealizing or stereotyping these women and the rural life, this paper recognised the need for acknowledgement of the multiplicity of lived experience as well as the author's own long term professional and personal connections to the area and the schools.

BACKGROUND

This paper draws upon five different perspectives found in the research literature. These perspectives are: firstly, situated knowledges and pedagogies of place; secondly, rural schools as workplaces; thirdly, professional identity and lived experience; fourthly, leadership in schools; and finally, reciprocity and generational nurture. The multiplicity of the research perspectives utilized here is intentional, as this paper represents the first overview of this pilot project and identifies aspects that might be further explored.

Situated Knowledges and Pedagogies of Place

Examining the broad range of research focused on teachers in rural landscapes highlights notions of locatedness and context, or more specifically, situated knowledges (Harroway, 1998), embodied and engaged pedagogies (Hooks, 1994), place pedagogies (McConaghy, 2002; Letts, Novak, Gottschall, Green, & Meyenn, 2005; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon, & de Carteret, 2011) and critical pedagogies of place and place consciousness (Gruenwald, 2003). These papers and other works on social justice in rural research (Roberts & Green, 2013) and the Bush Tracks studies (Miller, Graham, & Al-Awiwe, 2014) highlight the multiplicity of the rural educational work place experience. Letts et al. have argued convincingly for the value of using a lens of situated pedagogies and practices in rural schools. Drawing from the recent developments in research in this field, Letts et al. demonstrate the particular opportunities in leadership and contextualized place based pedagogies (2005, pp. 221-2).

Rural Schools

In the early 2000s, Miller, Graham and Paterson recognised a crisis in staffing rural schools and remote schools (2005). They identified a shortage of experienced teachers in these schools and this had led to teachers moving into leadership roles where they lacked both formal and informal support (2005, p. 14). Their study also identified two common themes: proximity to the rural communities and the transparency of the teachers' lives or the high visibility and accountability to that community (2005, p. 13). A decade on, this study returns to similar locations but focuses on the experiences of women in rural high schools. The lessons of the Bush Track research provide an intellectual and practical grounding, recognizing long-standing conditions in educational settings in rural communities.

Reciprocity and Generational Nurture

My previous research into women, reciprocity and nurture was focused on women within extended families and the way in which they embedded narratives of survival and generational nurturing in objects and stories (Nye, 2008). In this study the context is the rural educational workplace but similar themes of exchange and care began to emerge from the interviews. There is debate among sociologists as to whether reciprocity and the exchange of goods or services is reducible to a mere economic exchange (Gobel, Vogel, & Weber, 2013, p.38) but the reciprocity that I refer to in this paper is located in a much more altruistic discourse and one that might be found in the peripheral learning that occurs in communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Gender Inequity in the Career Progression.

There is evidence that male teachers in Australian schools are more likely to progress to executive and leadership roles despite the fact that there is a significantly fewer of them in the system (Addi-Racah & Ayalon, 2002; Leech, 2006; Tait, 2013). In 2011-12 women made up 86 per cent of primary school teachers. Research and media reports indicate that in the private sector similar patterns are repeated. (Bell, 2010). There is a significant body of international research on gendered leadership styles and the cultural and structural frameworks within educational institutions (Sachs & Blackmore, 1998; Oplatka & Atias, 2007). While it is illegal to be discriminatory based on gender in the process of promotion, the evidence of unequal numbers in school leadership suggest there are other factors involved.

METHODOLOGY

A Gendered Lens

The study is clearly a gendered project, specifically focusing on the lived experiences of women in rural schools. This recognises the significant research that identifies gender-specific work place experiences. The concerns of patriarchal discourses and practices in the educational setting of the past were, I thought, unlikely to be raised, yet for some women these issues were at the forefront of their minds. For other women different issues were more urgent.

The obvious necessity to be a reflective practitioner was clear and is echoed in other literature seeking to reveal women's stories. Long (1999) for example reiterates that women's lives are marked by difference and commonalities and that the multiplicity of women's stories offers rich data. Long suggests that it is how we interpret and read these differences and commonalities that needs to be scrutinized and situated in a larger discourse (1999, p. 11).

Reflective Practice

Although not explored in detail in this paper, the interviews all began with the question: Can you tell me about your own schooling? This approach established a conversational start to the research as well as being a tool for promoting self reflection. More than one participant made this connection when describing their personal philosophy: *it is like what I described when telling you about my experiences at school*. This is immediate evidence that our pedagogical and ontological perspectives are very often grounded in our own educational experiences. This approach has proven effective in similar research that demonstrates the connectivity between early experiences and practice in later life (Somerville, 2007; Nye, 2008; de Carteret, 2008; West, 2010; Nye, Hughes-Warrington, Roe, Russell, Deacon, & Kiem, 2011).

Lived Experience

As a means for exploring the lived experience of the participants, this study focuses on the communities of practice that develop in certain educational settings and draws explicitly from narratives of reciprocity, generational nurturing (Nye, 2008), autonomy authenticity (Archer, 2008) and agency (Bandura, 2001). This study has been influenced by research that examines lived experience and reflective practice in the workplace (West, 2010) and as a context specific and embodied practice (Boud, 2010). By the very nature of lived experience research, this study also applies a socio-historical lens to the narratives. Each participant is asked to share their own learning experiences at school recognising that contemporary work place and pedagogical practice does not exist in a temporal moment. Individual's experiences and practice are borne of a complex historical context.

The Rural Setting: Contextualized Methodology

The rural setting within which this research project is located is not a static site, rather one of multiple communities, identities and culture. Gruenwald (2003, p. 641) has argued, *once one begins to appreciate the pedagogical power of places, it is difficult to accept the institutional discourses, structures, pedagogies, and curriculums that ignore them*. Indeed he suggests researchers apply a *place conscious* approach (2003, p. 644). This research project acknowledged Gruenwald's views, but was also intentionally designed to avoid promoting a deficit model so often applied to rural schools. Like Roberts and Green (2013), this project did not seek to essentialise the rural school community as inherently disadvantaged. Indeed the notion of rural resilience risks contributing to a constructed homogenous *Bush Myth* (Roberts and Green, 2012, p. 766). The design of the project has therefore been shaped around notions of a critical pedagogy and the contextualising benefits of hermeneutical methods which can explore *the ways people connect their everyday experiences to the cultural representations of such experiences* (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000, p. 288). Specifically the study draws on situated knowledges, multiple historical lenses and lived experience. In this study the articulation and expression of life and workplace stories has the potential for participatory reflective practice and transformative thinking as well as transferrable narratives through dissemination to education audiences. In this way, research within the critical framework has an inherent potential for bringing about change.

Collecting and Analysing Data

As a means for developing a qualitative pilot study on workplace experiences in rural and regional schools, four high schools were identified in north-western NSW. After gaining permission from the school principals to contact their staff, emails were sent to prospective participants. These twenty two women were identified through the school web site or through discussions with colleagues. The women received information packages and list of the questions that would be posed. Day-long visits were then organized for each of the schools in two of the schools an interview room was offered by

the Principal for convenience. At the other two schools interviews were held in the Deputy's office and in a tea room. Ethical approval was sought and gained by both the university's ethics committee and by the NSW Department of Education's ethics process, SERAP.

In an endeavour to explore the lived experience of women teachers in rural high schools this project has relied primarily on in-depth qualitative interviews using open-ended questions. The questions included the following:

1. Can you tell me about your recollections of your own schooling?
2. What drew you to teaching?
3. Where did you train to become a teacher and do you have any particular memories of that training?
4. How long have you been teaching?
5. In your years of experience have you had the opportunity to mentor new teachers?
6. If so in what form did the mentoring take?
7. Is this a common practice in your experience?
8. What have the outcomes been?
9. Are you a member of any collegial teaching associations? (formal or informal)
10. If so, can you describe your experiences?
11. In reflecting on your years of teaching what would you regard as important advice to young women coming into the profession?
12. What pitfalls might be ahead of them?
13. What enrichment do they have to look forward to?
14. Who have been your inspiration figures during your teaching years?
15. Do you perceive a difference in workplace experience between men and women?
16. To what degree do you feel you have had professional autonomy in your working life?
17. What leadership roles (formal or informal) have you undertaken?
18. Have you enjoyed these roles – what did you like or dislike about these experiences?
19. Do you feel that your expertise and experience is recognised by your colleagues and your school executive?
20. Can you summarise your personal philosophy on teaching in a few sentences?

The participants were welcome to provide brief or extensive responses on any of the questions. This research design allowed for recognition of the situated knowledge of the participants and, in turn, offered the opportunity for them to shape or privilege the data that was most important to them.

As a means to encourage frank and free discussions, each participant and their schools are non-identifiable within the data. The rhizomatic metaphor (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; St Pierre, 1997) is one I employed in developing these interviews. I am conscious of the way in which individual stories and broader discourses can both exist on their own as well be *territorialized, organized and attributed* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). The resistance to meta narratives is important in this context since, as already noted in the literature, the risk of the bush myths or binaries that privilege certain groups and disadvantage others and the promotion of stereotypes is ever present.

A thematic coding practice was employed to analyse the transcripts. Again, I was conscious of the risks, not just from the popular discourses of rural deficit but of my own desire to identify a cumulative feminist knowledge base and academic community of practice. Multiple, close and deliberate readings were implemented specifically to revisit these concerns.

It is important to locate the researcher self within any research project. In this case, I am a lecturer in the School of Education at the nearby regional university, deeply involved with the teaching of pre-service teachers. I am also, however, from the district and come from a family of local educators. The landscape, the school buildings and community are familiar markers of my own childhood and my parents' workplaces. It is familiar territory and inevitably embedded with a discourse of revisiting the past and coming home. In turn there is the risk of romantic notions of the past tainting the data collection and analysis. What is potentially a design flaw of the research can be reinterpreted as a strength. That is to say, the participatory nature of the research—researching a community that you are a part of—offers particular situated and insider knowledges that help inform and enrich the research

FINDINGS

The women whose teaching experience ranged from first year out of university to nearing retirement all projected an energized discourse about their place in education and the profession. Another layer of enthusiasm was also evident when they began talking about the children they taught. There was a strong evidence of willingness, agency and confidence in these stories. The possibilities of participation in the school setting were, in the main, endless.

In this exploration of the data, I will focus on four aspects: mentoring, advice for prospective women teachers, narratives about generations and connectivity, and the glass ceiling. I have chosen these as they each contribute a dialogue about professional support, resilience and nurture, both formal and informal.

Mentoring

The women's experiences in being mentored and mentoring others, was varied. Not all women had mentors when they began their teaching career. In the following case, this teacher was well supported and given significant freedom to experiment:

I was the only female on the staff. They were all men. ... all of them were gorgeous. They were like my pseudo-Dads they all looked after me ... and my Head teacher ... was just magnificent, happy to let me try new things. He never once said to me 'oh that won't work'. He'd raise his eyebrows a bit and he'd say 'oh, we'll see how that goes'. ... He'd let me try all sorts of things and it was wonderful because yeah, that's what you need when you're teaching isn't it, to be able to try everything.

In contrast another participant told the story of being an outcast in her first post, when she filled a forced transfer position.

None of that was my doing. But they were terrible, they made me feel like it was all my fault somehow. People wouldn't speak to me. I didn't get a desk. I wasn't shown to the staff room, we don't want you here. It was terrible. So that was my introduction.

This woman went on to work with a woman that would become a long-term mentor who has encouraged her to take up new challenges.

So she was the one who told me that I was going for my head teacher's position. Two days before and I hadn't even thought about it. Yes you are and this is what you are doing. Bossed me into it. But I thanked her for that because I needed it.

Being a mentor to others seemed to be a natural progression for most of the women interviewed. There was a strong sense of commitment to helping all new staff, both women and men. How that mentoring was shaped varied depending on the individual and their current work conditions. When asked about what mentoring roles they have undertaken or mentoring they had received, one particularly experienced teacher responded with the following statement:

I've been doing a fair bit of that. It's quite difficult too because it's difficult to find time. I don't know why, but we just seem to be a lot more time poor now as teachers than we used to be.

Other teachers, newer to the profession, were still waiting for the opportunity to formally mentor new staff.

I have not had the chance to mentor anybody new in English as a new teacher, it would be something I would be happy to do.

Informal mentoring was something that most engaged in whenever the opportunity arose but with some degree of caution.

In my staffroom I do, but only when they express a need ... I don't wade in with my wellies and say this is what we are doing.

Fond memories of one's early years led to this story on the collegial and nurturing mentoring one teacher experienced in her early years.

I loved it. We'd go and sit in at lunchtimes and we'd all chat and talk together and help each other and that's what I loved about... we'd share resources and help and that to me is what faculty should do.

While most women had a number of mentors one teacher was fortunate to have the same mentor over a twenty five year career.

I had an amazing mentor and she is still my yard stick, so I look at my work and say 'Would I show that to Di?'

This type of long term mentoring represents a strong relationship built on reciprocity as the newer teacher became more experienced.

None of the women have had access to formal mentoring programs. Despite this absence, they found opportunities to develop mentoring relationships and indeed to become mentors themselves. The sense of an enduring reciprocity was especially evident in the discussions on mentoring.

The value of accessing mentoring programs or individuals was articulated in the following statement:

It's a real pitfall in teaching, is that we work in that sort of urgent quadrant of our brain and we're too busy, but actually having a mentor of some sort, even if it's just the critical friend, that's really important stuff, because it helps you objectify a lot of things. Teachers often work in a really subjective world. They're always on the fly and they don't get [that] the collegial dialogues are as important as what they're doing in front of the classroom. ...So to stop, think, talk it through with somebody else who's in the same mindset empowers you

Remembering One's early career and advice to prospective teachers

Each of the teachers in this study was asked what advice they would give to young women considering coming into the teaching profession. Like the teachers interviewed by McConaghy et al. (2005), the women in this study largely felt university training did little to prepare them for the realities of teaching in rural schools. This is not to say they did not enjoy their time at university. Nor did they suggest that young women should reconsider the career. There was a considerable consensus, however, that young women were arriving into their new profession unprepared for what was ahead of them. There is of course strong evidence in education research (Green & Reid, 2003; Miller et al., 2005; Roberts & Green, 2013) that the teacher, in their first year out of university, is at high risk of leaving the profession within the first twelve months. Therefore, it was not surprising that the discussions on what advice one might give to young women were marked by care and concern.

A number of women compared the changes between their own experiences and the current new women teachers coming into the field. This focused on two aspects: vulnerability due to age and the impact of becoming young parents. In the stories of past experience, there was a certain recognisable vulnerability that came from the lack of age difference between the students and the newly graduated teacher. This was especially felt in small rural communities when attending social gatherings out of school.

The voice of caution was particularly strong as seen in the following comments:

I'd really say to them really consider what opportunities are available in other career fields, and look at the income for the hours of work and the hours of study you have to do. ... Teaching is a very, very stressful job today ... I'd be saying just check out every avenue you've got available to you and make sure that education is where you want to go.

I think most important for them is to learn to look after themselves, as well, because they do tend to put heart and soul in and then end up exhausted. And to be mindful of the fact you've got to learn and it's OK to learn, and it's OK to get it wrong, and it's OK to make a mistake. This expectation of perfection is very damaging, and it's very damaging particularly in high achieving young women.

I think young women can be steered away from teaching because it's not seen as being a, it's certainly not a glamorous job by any stretch of the imagination and you're not going to earn huge amounts of money, but it depends on what you really value as well and if you value that relationship that you build with students.

I found it daunting, I walked into my year 9 class and the boys are three times the size of me and very tall so that was a little daunting as a female teacher.

The participants often put forward these notes of caution and concern, but they also offered positive suggestions. It is worth noting too that the women shifted between discourses of the new young teacher as vulnerable, to looking for glamour, to notions of lifelong care, mentoring and wellbeing. This varied response is a reminder of the multiplicity of women's experience but also demonstrates a shared and generational desire to support each other in the schools and the profession.

Generational teaching in rural areas

In rural communities it is seemingly not uncommon to find new teachers returning to the area or region they grew up in (Reid, Green, Cooper, Hastings, Lock, & White, 2010). In this study four of the teachers came from 'families of teachers' who had taught in the area, if not in the same school. Six women were working in the school district they attended as children and 81 per cent had grown up in rural or regional areas. This trend continued, though less strongly with the choice of university or teachers college with half of the participants studied at the rural university, the University of New England and only a quarter of them attending the University of Newcastle and a similar number at institutions in Sydney.

There was a consistent trend for women to follow parental career patterns and to stay in rural and regional areas. This narrative resonated with my and my own family's experience and indeed I was interviewing teachers in schools I had attended or my parents had worked in more than two decades earlier. One of the women interviewed was teaching with her daughter in the same school and her father had retired from teaching in recent years. This discourse of familiarity resounded again and again, reminding me of my own locatedness. Their teachers had sometimes been mine; the places were familiar, the absences shared and the community culture recognisable. This participatory researcher aspect of the project is not necessarily problematic rather it further demonstrated the significance of place, belonging and generations that can permeate rural and regional communities and the schools.

The idea of generations of teachers also brought a sense of a culture of support, inclusiveness and embeddedness. The familiarity brings safety and a sense of belonging and knowing.

My parents taught here, my daughter teaches here, I teach here ... we know people in all those age groups.

I am truly blessed because I grew up in the community. I know their parents, I know their grandparents, I know their cousins, their aunts, their uncles, their next door neighbours and I know that and they know I know that [laughter].

Another teacher made the following statements indicating the wide reach of the profession:

I've come from a family of teachers, ... it is not really a job, it is a profession and almost all people who teach sort of can't help themselves ... in my family there's a long history of teaching my husband keeps saying, 'oh don't tell them (their children) to become teachers', which is ironic, because he comes from a family of teachers as well.

A generational connection was for some of the teachers (and myself included) already embedded in the profession and in the locale. For others the generational nurturing was simply through more experienced women teachers assisting newcomers. There is a degree of reassurance that one can draw from this connective discourse and might somewhat reflect Letts et al. (2005) and others' notions of situated knowledge and pedagogies (Somerville et al., 2011).

Discourses of Inequity

From a historical perspective, women in the teaching profession work under much improved conditions than their predecessors. Meadmore's historical analysis of the departmental archives women in early twentieth century in rural Queensland portrayed a grim story of unequal wages, forced resignation upon marriage, and where 'their presence was tolerated more than valued' (2010, 437). In contemporary times, this study sought to apply a gendered lens and look at the experiences of

women in rural high schools, but there was an expectation of a general sense of gendered equity. It was unexpected that a discourse and practice of inequity would be dominant in the transcripts. The examples varied from poor behaviour to institutionalised patriarchy. In one instance of particularly poor conduct, a man in an executive role took credit for the work of one of the interviewees. She tells the story:

I wrote a behavioural program for the school a couple of years ago and the deputy principal took all of the credit for ... the creation and implementation of this program that I had written. ... I think it becomes very difficult for women to be perceived as being on an equal playing field with these men, who will just take your work and claim it as their own, essentially.

The above-mentioned school had a significant imbalance in the number of men and women in executive or head teacher roles. It was an imbalance felt keenly by each of the women interviewed at that school and the subsequent lack of autonomy was keenly felt. The appropriation of a colleague's work was however a one-off, and while the women all chose to highlight the imbalance, they also spoke about how they keep working and achieving. How each one deconstructed and explained the circumstances varied according to personal views and particular experiences, a finding that acted as a reminder that the discourse of resilience may take multiple forms. The combination of time, place and individuals shaped the response to inequity or other imbalances.

For one teacher the conservative gendered discourses of assigning certain jobs within the school have proven to be both patriarchal and inequitable.

I find I get given jobs which are about care, welfare and literacy. I don't get asked to do jobs like the timetable, which are power status jobs in the school because you control what people do and where they go. Younger members of staff who've come in as head teachers, men, who have much less experience than me, have been asked to be deputy over me.... It is a climate in the school.

For some women the expectations of what women and men should achieve or commit to in their working career varied. This impacted not only on professional practice but what some women did in their homes and the commitments to raising their children.

I think you get torn between your role at the school and your role as a parent, and you've got to find that balance between the two and so a lot of women at that point turnaround and say, I can't go for a promotion for the next ten to 15-years because I need to be there for my children.

Those women who seek the high positions are faced with a prejudice in some schools as described in the following statement:

I think there certainly is a double standard as to what's expected of women and what's expected of men, especially as you go through the hierarchy of the schools. We had a female principal here a couple of years ago and what she did in comparison to what our male principals have done since is just phenomenal.

The 'tap on the shoulder' is a colloquial term I heard with some frequency during the interviews. It refers to executive staff offering lower level staff the opportunity to act in certain positions temporarily. It is a largely informal process by which executive staff identify capable workers. The benefit of acting in a higher role means that person has experience in the position and a better chance to be successful in formal promotion application processes. The absence of 'tap on the shoulder' for women teachers was the cause of not just annoyance, but a real sense of injustice in a time when such inequality was thought to no longer exist in the broader community.

It's not glamorous. I think if you're looking for promotion it's very male dominated.

I believe the glass ceiling is very much in place and it is actually promoted by the hierarchy and that men are still seen, particularly in this area, as being the 'go to people with the answers'. They are the people that are tapped on the shoulder and it riles me intensely It is seriously, very much a boy's club.

In turn this experience can be cited when applying for promotions. Three women who had worked for more than twenty years in these schools claimed women were very often passed over. Their frustration and annoyance was clearly evident. In their view male teachers were very often moved

along and up the career trajectory at a much faster rate. The very small percentage of women holding principal, executive and head teacher roles in the region, or at an individual school was raised a number of times.

The narrative of such inequity of career progression was not one I had expected to find in this study but it was most certainly present. It is also important to note however that three of the twenty-two women declared gender inequity was something that occurred in the past and not in the present. Two of these women were very new to the profession and their idealism and optimism on the certainty gender equity was refreshing. The third woman was in her mid career and was satisfied that her merit and subsequent career progression existed in a gender neutral sphere.

In contrast to the discourse of inequality and patriarchy, it is pertinent to also note that there was also a culture where a progressive liberal orientation and practice developing. Young fathers, for example, are taking up different views to the workplace and home life and in turn are more involved in child rearing. This is then impacting on the work culture in that family friendly conditions need to be available for both men and women in the profession. As one executive staff member stated:

I have got young dads on my staff and they have the same responsibilities – their wives are working however when I started it was different. This generation has a very different experience than what we did in my generation and mine is very different to my mother's generation.

In more conservative and traditional times of the past (Meadmore, 2010) the normative discourse devalued wives' careers, promoted male privilege and advocated specific gender roles. This executive teacher quoted above, has observed a shift in the home lives of the workers despite having earlier in the interview, raised concerns about the continued disadvantage for women in the workplace promotion processes. Change is coming, but in certain areas, and arguably to the advantage of men rather than both groups.

DISCUSSION

The women teaching in rural high schools embrace a very particular discourse of reciprocity and nurture in the workplace. Their stories focused on achievement, overcoming disadvantage, taking advantage of resources as they became available and drawing from and contributing to a school community. As a researcher I have been conscious of the risks identified by Roberts and Green (2013) of an emergent stereotype of the bush myth, of proud and resilient women beating the odds. The myth does however belong in folklore. It was evident that the work place is geographically isolated and they did struggle with a patriarchal culture around promotion, yet these professional women were still innovative, productive and effective in the classroom and in their communities. This was particularly evident in discourses on mentoring, leadership, and the gender divide. As in Reid et al., (2010, p. 267), this study found that the deficit model of the rural school and the discourse of rural poverty was in clear need of interrogation. Indeed that discourse only does a disservice to the children through poor expectations of country children on the part of policy makers and of the wider urban-based populations.

Mentoring and leadership was a notable emergent narrative and aligned well with the work of Bush Track researchers (Miller et al., 2014; McConaghy et al., 2011) who found women describing leadership styles that *foreground teamwork and emancipatory strategies* (Miller et al., 2014, p. 99). Collaborative practices and team work were clear markers of workplace practice for the women. Although the size and composition of teams might vary, in each case the discourse was reflective, and about building and developing competencies and opportunities. Each time mentoring was discussed; it was done in a way that indicated it was a natural component of the profession. The culture of reciprocity was deeply embedded in the women's stories not just in terms of professional mentoring and advancement but also in regard to personal wellbeing.

A new teacher's sense of well being and ability to settle into a new school and its community was a concern raised by a number of experienced teachers. It is also echoed in the literature (Manuel, 2003). The concern that many starting teachers are often only a few years older than their students and not long out of school is a recognised issue (Power, 2011, p. 81). This seemed to be less of a concern for young men than young women. These young women it was thought, were yet to establish themselves

or gain an understanding of their student cohort, colleagues and broader community and perceivably more vulnerable to feeling isolated and leaving. Despite the numerous issues raised, all of the participants in this study indicated their strong desire to support young women who did make the commitment to stay in the profession and in their rural communities. Again the sense of reciprocity is particular strong. The women clearly wanted to give back the positive support they had received in their early years.

It is important to note that there are two themes that were absent in this paper; race and sexual identity. In proclaiming to explore the lived experience of a particular group of women teachers, the study did in fact tell the stories of primarily white women. The interviews did not explore the experiences of Indigenous women teachers in rural schools and this is most certainly a topic that should be examined. Secondly, during the analysis process of this project, I noticed a heteronormative discourse in almost every interview. There was a shared assumption that we were talking about heterosexual women and indeed women who would be balancing their careers with bearing children. The absence of women in same sex relationships, transgender women or women who did not have children was evident to me only as I started analysing the stories about expectations and parenting. This highlights a clear omission in my research design and as the research project develops it is an area that needs to be addressed in future interviews and dissemination.

The study highlighted a number of areas that would benefit from further research but it has also shown that there is a need to ensure that rural teachers feel they have a voice. None of the women had participated in a research project before, despite the close proximity of the university, as one participant stated: *Nobody had even asked us about these things before.* The willingness of the women to participate in this research and share their stories is indicative of their desire to speak up about their workplace and experience as well as to gain recognition for the work, generally, of women teachers in rural schools.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have suggested that there is a particular sense of collegiality and reciprocity in the community of women teachers in rural schools. The personal stories contributed to this research project reflect both shared narratives as well as diverse and individual experiences. Common to all has been a belief in the importance of nurturing colleagues and creating a productive and healthy work place.

The research also revealed a concern about the process of promotions and career trajectories. While young early career women were idealistic in the belief that their profession was entirely equitable in terms of gender, the more experienced women were, in the main, very concerned that inequity was entrenched. The statement that *it is appalling* offers a curt insight into the informal processes that benefit male teachers. There was a sense of frustration that there was nothing they could do to change the situation: *it's not going to change any time soon*, one declared. Instead of resigning themselves to this inequity or leaving the profession, these women teachers demonstrate a commitment to their career and to working within the confines of inequity. Some women are getting through to head teacher, deputy and Principal roles. The discourse surrounding these women is one of admiration, but more importantly shaped around notions of collegial mentoring and innovative and located pedagogy.

I have argued that the group of women teachers shared a number of characteristics; in particular a desire to enact a located pedagogy entrenched in affirmation, reciprocity, resilience, innovation, nurture and support. Their keen sense of the issues faced by new and early career women was especially evident among the more experienced teachers. They also articulated an informal practice of favouritism in the 'tap on the shoulder' for men when equity and merit based promotion is embedded in the departmental policies. As I had hoped, the women themselves had identified their primary concerns rather than the researcher selecting topics for discussion and, in turn, the findings demonstrated the insights that come from situated knowledge of the work place.

This project is still a work in progress, given the number of questions asked of the women there are more aspects that require analysis and the opportunity for more interviews remains. So far the women's stories have been both organic and diverse. Their shared commitment to their students,

fellow staff and school community was clear. The rural school was in the main a very satisfying work place and one that lent itself towards fostering communities of practice that extended beyond the work place, disciplines or subject areas and into the community at large. The women also demonstrated their agency and intent on speaking their mind on less comfortable topics such as gender inequity. This paper provides a broad over view of just a few of the aspects of the women's working lives and offers an insight into the scope not just of the multiplicity of their experiences but for further analysis using multiple lens.

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