

TEACHER AND UNIVERSITY EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING LANGUAGES IN RURAL SETTINGS: A SONATA FORM CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The experience of teaching languages in rural schools differs markedly from teaching languages in urban contexts, in relation to the size and nature of communities and their interactions, numbers of teachers of languages, in and out of school contact, and in the cultural and language backgrounds of students and their likelihood of opportunities to interact with users of the language being learned. The rewards, rather than the challenges of teaching languages in rural contexts are explored in this paper by a classroom languages teacher and a tertiary languages teacher educator and researcher, in a 'sonata form' (two-voiced, dialogic and reflexive) conversation, aimed at providing insights into the importance and significance of languages education for rural Australian students, and the pleasures for teachers of this crucial work when engaged in rural settings.

CONTEXT

The authors of this paper live and work in a rural environment. The first author is a classroom languages teacher in a rural secondary school with some twenty years of experience working in this setting. Working in the country by choice, having given up a permanent position in the city to 'come home' to a place that provides a sense of connection, confirms her identity and history, and allows her to engage in a close community where she can foster young peoples' engagement with their place, lives and futures as they explore their own identities through language and culture learning. The second author lives in the same community, teaching pre-service language teachers at a rural university, and conducting research with teachers of languages in schools. A relative newcomer to the bush, she too is concerned with how teachers of languages in rural settings engage with place, identity and self-perception, and how this impacts on their work as teachers in rural schools. Working together, the authors were concerned in this paper with providing insights into the positives of rural languages education- identifying what makes this work rewarding, rather than focusing on deficits and challenges of rural contexts of work. A sonata form methodology was chosen as a way to allow the two voices to contribute, to tell this story from two perspectives, link the insights to wider theoretical discussions, and provide a snapshot of rural practice that will be of interest to others working in similar settings, or to those considering a shift to the country.

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Representing Teachers' Practical Knowledge: Towards Collaborative Practice

Over the past few decades there has been a call for more research that genuinely represents teachers' practical knowledge that can be used to inform classroom practice and the body of theoretical pedagogical knowledge. From around 1987, Schulman was arguing the case for conducting research on teachers' *wisdom of practice*, with others following who championed ideas such as drawing on teachers' *practical knowledge* (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), and teachers' *craft knowledge* (Leichhardt, 1990). Cochran-Smith and Lytle, in 1993, challenged the assumption that pedagogical knowledge was and should be generated from the *outside-in* by university researchers, which was *imparted* to teachers; and instead argued for the validity and necessity of practitioner research to inform from the *inside-out* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In the mid-1990s, Darling-Hammond argued for teacher knowledge to be documented by or conducted in collaboration with teachers if serious and sustainable reform of teaching was to be made (Darling-Hammond, 1996).

Various models of both conducting and reporting teachers' inquiries have followed, necessarily reflecting the variety and complexity of teachers' work, their foci of inquiry, and the broad means for presenting findings relevant to teachers' own circumstances and intended audiences. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) distilled much of this thinking in their important text *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*, in which they argued that teachers face increasingly *trying times* within what Comber (2013) describes as an era of *rampant standardisation*, in which increased accountability to standardised norms and narrowly-focused testing regimens, the promulgation of negative public perceptions of teaching, and widespread demands for teaching standards to improve, surround and impact on the work of teachers. These authors argue that educators themselves must play key roles in designing, implementing and evaluating educational reforms, and that practitioner research should be considered vital for such reforms, as well as for the development of teacher knowledge and practice, and to increase teacher agency. The *good news stories* of successful and engaging practice, of which there are many, and the considered evaluation from teachers working *in situ* will then have more influence on broader movements for improved and more rewarding practice, better teacher preparation through pre-service programs, and for social change and social justice through more evidenced teaching approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

One of the obstacles to reporting teachers' practical knowledge inquiry is the discourse tension between how working teachers describe and evaluate what they do, and how the educational research community reports such work, with challenges about whose vocabulary, priorities, writing formats, conceptions and intentions are prioritised, and for which audiences the work will be prepared and disseminated (Dibble & Rosiek, 2002). What is important, if shared understandings between these groups are to be gained, and real advances made in improving practice, teacher agency and teacher education, is that each does not move to its own extremes, to the exclusion of the other, and outside the purview of each other's inquiry and discourse orbits. Instead, collaborative inquiry needs collaborative reporting modes that will be of significance to the wider community of teachers, teacher educators and university researchers of teachers and teacher educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Morgan, Comber, Freebody, & Nixon, 2014; Wenger, Dinsmore, & Villagomez, 2012). Within such modes, however, both discourses - the voice and concerns of the teacher, and of the university researcher analysis - need representation.

In rural education contexts, the significance of teacher voice, and of research collaborations to disseminate this voice, takes on a more urgent dimension, especially in regard to representing the positives and uniqueness of such work, distinct from the connected but nonetheless different *burgeoning urbanising landscapes of the contemporary world* (White & Corbett, 2014, p. 2). While the *challenges* of attracting teachers to rural settings dominate the literature, it is imperative that a shift in focus from deficits and marginalisation of rural teaching occurs, so that a greater

understanding about working in rural contexts can be disseminated to wider teaching and teaching research communities, and so that the particularities of rural teaching can be better understood. White and Corbett (2014, p. 2) espouse that understanding rurality in education requires *serious unpacking through theoretically and methodologically sophisticated and careful research*, to provide *tales of the field* in nuanced and varied ways. This paper is a foray into that territory of careful research, with the methodology chosen to allow this *tale from the field* to have impact that an alternative methodology would not support. The need for a methodology that allowed for theorised discussion was paramount, but it also required an approach that would allow for the strength and originality of the teacher voice to be of prime importance. Sonata form case study provides such an approach.

Sonata Form Case Study

A significant body of work now exists in which the intersecting discourses of teachers and university researchers sit side by side, with both working together, in developing inquiry into understanding the work of teachers, and in reporting this work together (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Morgan et al., 2014; Wenger et al., 2012). One mode for reporting such work, and especially teacher narrative, is the so-called 'sonata-form' (see for example Black, 2011; Chang & Rosiek, 2003; Sconiers & Rosiek, 2000; Dibble & Rosiek, 2002). Sonata form writing is based on the musical form of this name. Typically, the first movement of multi-movement musical pieces is in sonata form, which consists of three phases: an **exposition** or introduction of a theme; a **development**, where two themes in different keys are contrasted; and a **recapitulation**, where the themes are, at least in part, harmoniously resolved (Sonata-form, 2014). As a mode for reporting collaboration between teacher and university researchers, the sonata form provides a scaffold for investigation of an issue of teacher practice (described in the **exposition**); co-representation of the teacher's narrative and the university researcher's interpretation of the narrative, including analytical perspectives (explored side by side in the **development**); and a resolution of the issue to the point of providing an indication of a way forward – or advice for others – in addressing the practice issue (in the **recapitulation**).

We use the sonata form framing in this collaborative paper reporting on a single case study, for its particularly apt match to the needs of the research. Teacher-researcher and university-researcher both working in the field of languages education in a rural setting in New South Wales, Australia, are able to voice their understanding of the issue in focus, the teaching of languages in rural schools in Australia. Through the sonata form the voice, understanding the perspective of the teacher (the 'case') who deliberately chooses this context of work over other settings are given prominence. The teacher voice is then amplified through the university-researcher's commentary, theorising the discussion without impeding on the 'tale from the field' that is the core text and which needs its own style and cadence to effectively speak to and influence readers, more powerfully than a recount by a third party.

Using this approach, we outline some of the complexities of this issue in the exposition, by way of introducing readers to the field and placing on the table some of the features that differ from teaching languages in urban or other contexts, and the different demands this teaching and subject context places on the teacher, as well as the pleasures experienced by the teacher in working in a rural setting. In the development, we situate the two voices contributing to the discussion side by side, literally, in a two column presentation of the first theme – the teacher's narrative about her work in a rural school, based around seven key concepts that inform and contribute to her teaching experience and philosophy; and the second – the university researcher's interpretation and analysis of the themes in the teacher's work, with reference to current research literature. In the recapitulation, we offer some suggestions about how teachers and university researchers, researching languages education in rural settings, might share knowledge and understanding arising from the shared perspectives in this case study. We also reflect on how we might work together to provide professional learning opportunities for our community of practice in schools in rural areas in New South Wales and across Australia, so that more teachers' narratives are heard, teachers connect with the theoretical research perspectives that might allow them to

interpret and reflexively respond to their practice, and to indicate how we might work as a community of practitioners, for mutual benefits.

Data for the study were collected through a series of loosely structured interviews and writing and response tasks centred on the positives of teaching languages in a rural context. At each meeting, discussion of the thoughts and writing by the teacher would be considered for emerging themes and connections to the literature. The university researcher would suggest readings and provide notes on relevant literature, leading eventually to the writing of the two-voiced narrative (sonata), in which both writers developed their contributions, responding to each other's perspective and reaching a harmonisation in the **recapitulation**. The research and writing took place over a three-month period. The project was conceived throughout as a collaboration, aimed at providing theorised insights into teaching of languages in a rural community. The intention was to explore sonata form case study as a methodology to facilitate such insights in a way that would be meaningful to readers 'looking in' on this case, and as a way of honouring both teacher voice and extending research paradigms for collaborative research. It was hoped that such an approach would allow readers to find resonance with practice and thinking in their own contexts, and/or inspiration to adopt a similar approach of collaborative research as an insightful approach to acknowledging the positives and uniqueness of rural teachers and rural teaching contexts.

EXPOSITION

Teaching of Languages in the Bush

Discussion about teaching in rural and remote areas of Australia often engages with the disadvantages of these positions, difficulties encountered in negotiating suitable contractual arrangements and the complexities of attracting and retaining teachers (see for example Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Sharplin, 2002; Somerville, Plunkett, & Dyson, 2010; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Increasingly, the emphasis on the negative aspects of rural teaching is being tempered with discussion of the benefits and affordances, with more nuanced analyses of rural teaching positions, intended to shift emphasis from a deficit view of rural teaching contexts to closer examination of how teachers might gain professionally and personally from such placements. Hudson and McCluskey (2013), for example, in discussing professional experience opportunities for pre-service teachers, note a range of issues about placements in rural settings. These include the view that staffing of schools in rural and remote areas continues to present difficulties, as it is still the case that most teachers elect to teach in urban centres; there remains a lack of resources; there is cultural, social and professional isolation; and teachers are reluctant to be away from family and friendship networks. They do, however, point to the benefits of such placements, as a shift in perceptions:

However, teachers who take up positions in these locations often enjoy the close relationships they develop with students, the collegiality of the teaching staff, the friendliness of the community, and the many social activities available (Hudson & McCluskey, 2013, p. 286).

This view is expanded in Beutel, Adie and Hudson's (2011) study promoting rural teaching positions. They note that:

While teachers in rural schools may feel isolated geographically, socially and professionally, there are many positive experiences associated with living and working beyond urban areas (pp. 3–4).

These authors point to rural communities being viewed as quiet, with pleasing environments, usually having a strong sense of community, and possessing a very social atmosphere. The possibility of a more relaxed lifestyle is identified, along with a focus on community events, sports and other outdoor activities (Beutel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011). They add that although others (e.g. Boylan & McSwan, 1998) have argued there is a hangover of the negative stereotype from past years, in which rural schools were depicted as offering inferior education and being staffed by

transient and inexperienced teachers, this view is no longer justified, as recent studies indicate growing levels of satisfaction among new teachers in rural areas (Beutel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011). They conclude that the positive aspects need further attention in preparing teachers for school placements:

Rather than focusing on a deficit view of rural life, these more positive aspects need to be promoted with potential beginning teachers (Beutel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011, pp. 3–4).

Sharplin’s (2002) survey of pre-service teachers in Western Australia about responses to the prospect of rural and remote teaching placements identified similar concerns with rural teaching positions, but also identified the following (Table 1) perceived attractions, categorised into professional and personal or lifestyle/social attractions:

Table 1: Perceived attractions of teaching in a rural and remote area categorised according to professional and personal/social dimensions (Sharplin, 2002)

Professional Attractions	Personal/Social Attractions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional opportunities • Opportunities for increased responsibilities • Small school size • Increased knowledge of staff and students as a result of small size and close community contact • Expectations of a different curriculum and variety of teaching experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Part of a community • Great place for own family, especially children • Active social life • Diversity of community • Novelty of the experience

The positive aspects are taken up in the work of many other researchers also, and it is some of these perspectives that inform the study in this paper. Green and Reid (2014), in a larger volume dedicated to considering educational research in rural settings (White & Corbett, 2014), discuss the importance of consideration of ‘space’ and connections to ‘place’ in teaching in rural settings, noting that ‘different geographies have different social effects’ (Green & Reid, 2014, p. 26), and that teachers in rural settings respond to the place, communities, physical environment and location with an altered awareness from many working in urban settings. The interest in ‘place-conscious’ and ‘place-based pedagogies’ since the early 1990s (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Comber, Morgan, Freebody, & Nixon, 2014; Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007; Wells & Trimboli, 2014), has also attracted interest in researching the relationship of rural teachers to the places in which they teach, and how teachers in rural settings often relate positively to the ‘place’ of their work. While not seeking to idealise rural settings as ideal locations for all intending teachers, it is important to provide evidence of how positive identifications are being realised and deeply felt in relation to place and consequently to wellbeing (Comber, Morgan, & Freebody, 2014; Wells & Trimboli, 2014). How this connection manifests in rural settings is even more needed, as there is, as yet, scant literature elucidating such perspectives (White & Corbett, 2014).

So how does thinking about the positive aspects of teaching in rural settings influence the teaching of *languages* in the rural settings? Languages teaching out of Australia’s urban settings presents its own challenges and opportunities, different from those encountered by generalist classroom teachers, and teachers of large enrolment subjects. Many rural schools employ only one languages teacher, who may also share a fractional position across a number of schools in a region (Liddicoat, Scarino, Curnow, Kohler, Scrimgeour, & Morgan, 2007; Morgan & Scrimgeour, 2014). Often the language is one with few users in the community, and, although Australian rural communities are increasingly multicultural and plurilingual, there is often an entrenched ‘monolingual mindset’

(Clyne, 2008), with pervasive community views that English is the only language needed, and that shifting the focus from English to other languages will decrease learning time in and proficiency with English.

Staffing language-teaching positions in rural settings can be problematic, with languages identified as an area requiring more specialist teachers by the New South Wales, Western Australian and Queensland education departments (Department of Education [DET], 2013; Department of Education and Communities [DEC], 2014; Department of Education, Training and Employment [DETE], 2014). Filling languages teaching places, in sustainable programs that allow for continuity of learning for students, therefore remains a focus of concern. For some teachers of languages, however, and in some rural settings, there is competition for sought-after continuing positions, and tremendous camaraderie amongst languages teachers in the districts, which attracts teachers to these positions. It is such a setting that is the focus of the study in this paper, where teachers of languages are actively seeking positions, rather than wishing to leave; and where gaining a continuing position is seen as a highly desirable reward.

In the next section of the paper, the **development**, we see how some of the points about the positives of teaching in rural settings are considered by the teacher whose work is the focus of this paper. Jenny is an experienced teacher of German working in a public high school in a northern New South Wales rural setting. While this case is not intended to represent or speak for the experiences of teachers across different contexts and the many and varied settings of rural and remote schools in Australia, it does provide insights into the thinking and experiences of one teacher, told through her own voice. Jenny's narrative is related to relevant research literature, where connections with the generalised statements about the positives of rural teaching positions can be made. In exploring her story in this way, we provide a 'situated' view of teacher identity, and the valuing of teacher narrative as pedagogical research, with wider implications for practice, teacher wellbeing, and the preparation of teachers of languages for rural practice.

DEVELOPMENT

Continuing the sonata form, the two themes or voices of the contributors to this paper are explored below. In the left column is the narrative of the teacher, Jenny, a teacher of German in a NSW rural public school. Invited to discuss the positives of being a teacher of languages in a rural setting, a number of themes emerged, which became the focus of discussion and writing. Jenny concentrates on why she wanted to teach in the country, the benefits in relation to discipline issues, knowing the students and their families, community enthusiasm for languages learning, the influence of peers and community, in-country experience in the two-way exchange, and the ongoing connection with families after the students have left her class and the school. Many of these ideas she identifies have been mentioned above as the positive attributes of rural teaching positions in the experience of a broader range of teachers, providing confirmation of these generalised benefits, useful to other teachers and aspiring teachers making choices about their own careers.

In the right hand column are comments on the teacher's narrative by the university researcher and teacher of languages education teachers in a rural university, Anne-Marie. She comments on the teacher's narrative, drawing connections to the literature and theory that inform the teacher's comments. Each writes in a voice of her choice appropriate to her role in the sonata theme: the teacher uses first person narrative form; the university researcher uses third person analytical discourse.

Theme 1: The decision to teach in a rural setting: To know and be known

The revelation that I wanted to teach in the country came as I sat at one of the many sets of traffic lights on my way from Bexley to Randwick, where I was working in the field of distance education at the Open High School. I saw the small square patch of sky overhead and pined for the wide horizons of my home town. The Open High School was, ironically, totally enclosed by steel fences and gates with coded locks. And there were no students on site. One of my colleagues boasted happily that he could walk right past his students in the street and they would have no idea that he was their teacher.

This was not so very far removed from other teachers I had worked with in Seven Hills and Blacktown who chose to travel hours to work rather than live near their students, who they definitely did not want to see outside school hours. By contrast I had moved to Seven Hills so that I could be part of the community where I taught. At the Open High School, I travelled to meet all my students face-to-face, initiated phone lessons and established online classes, so that students could contact both me and each other at any time. I really wanted to connect with my students. I have discovered over the years that it is much more rewarding to teach where you know and are known.

Jenny's revelation about wanting to teach in a rural setting confirms the research related to teachers' needs to connect with place, as an important aspect of identity and indeed a reason for becoming or continuing to be a teacher (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007; Green & Reid, 2014; Gruenewald, 2008). For Jenny, the connection to place is critical, and provides a significant conduit for connecting with the lives of the learners with whom she is working. The choice to move to a rural school was also seen as a need to 'go home' in her case, to the wide horizons of her childhood town. While she recognises that this desire is not that of all teachers- some of whom she indicates don't want to even meet their students, let alone run into them out of school hours- it was important for her, and a further affirmation of the importance of 'place' as signifying a positive sense of identity (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007).

Jenny's identification of the isolation and dislocation of the Open High School, a school with no students within its walls, is important as an indicator of her need to form relationships with students that includes actual face-to-face contact, missing from the everyday context of teaching in this school. While it is not required of Open High School teachers that they visit their students in their remote locations, Jenny saw this as vital to her role as their teacher. The significance of teacher-student relationships to learning and for teachers' feelings of wellbeing is well documented in the educational research literature (see, for example, Prosser, Lucas, & Reid, 2010; Rimm- Kaufman, 2014).

... students who have close, positive and supportive relationships with their teachers will attain higher levels of achievement than those students with more conflictual relationships. If a student feels a personal connection to a teacher, experiences frequent communication with a teacher, and receives more guidance and praise than criticism from the teacher, then the student is likely to become more trustful of that teacher, show more engagement in the academic content presented, display better classroom behavior, and achieve at higher levels academically. Positive teacher-student relationships draw students into the process of learning and promote their desire to learn (Rimm-Kaufman, 2014)

Jenny's comment on the need to know and be known is echoed in the following statement from an American teacher considered a leading voice in 'turnaround' pedagogies for student learning improvement.

There is the belief among some that camaraderie between teachers and students leads to unprofessional familiarity or places the teacher in a weakened position in the classroom. Nothing could be further from the truth. Strong relationships

	<p>encourage learner exploration, dialogue, confidence, and mutual respect.</p> <p><i>I made it my business to know everything I could about my students. Where they lived and with whom, how often they changed schools, how many siblings they had, whether or not they lived in a house or an apartment, whether there was trauma or drama in the household. ... The more you know about a person, the easier it is to develop an alliance (if that is your intention). Positive, healthy relationships rely on clear communication. Without it, misunderstandings occur and intentions are misinterpreted. I wanted an open pathway to learning, so I was open to their questions, as well (Pierson, 2013).</i></p> <p>The literature on teaching languages describes the distinctiveness of languages as a learning area, recognising that it a subject that engages with learner identity in a different way from other subject areas, as it is so intimately connected with exploring who we are as situated users of languages, learning about the lives and thinking of ‘others’ using a new language and situated in a different cultural context (Morgan & Scrimgeour, 2014; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). ‘Knowing and being known’ is identified as critical to creating a positive language learning environment in which teachers have <i>first hand experience of students’ learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, ... the social structure of the school, and what it requires, of teacher and student, for survival and for success; she knows the community of which the school is a part, and has a sense of what it will and will not accept</i> (Elbaz, 1993, in Kumaravadivelu, 2012, p. 33).</p>
<p>Theme 2: The decision to return ‘home’ to teach: Identification with place</p>	
<p><i>I took a risk, gave up my permanent position in Sydney and came home to the town where my forebears lie in graves dating back to the 1800s. My grandparents were born here, my parents met and married here. My father lectured at the university for 30 years and my mother was the director of the Aboriginal Preschool for 17 years. Many of my colleagues were taught by my father. Some of the Aboriginal staff and many of the parents and relatives of the Aboriginal students that I teach were taught by my mother. My own children attended the school where I work. I taught them and their friends, the children of my colleagues and the children of people I went to school with. I currently teach the children of my youngest daughter's teacher...this may all sound incestuous but the web of connection makes for rich, deep and real relationship which is reflected in educational experiences both for my students and for me.</i></p>	<p>Jenny reinforces the importance of ‘place’, ‘identity’ and ‘relationships’ in this passage. The sense of a rural town being ‘home’, with myriad personal connections, spanning generations, and the capacity to know the lives and histories of others, provides her with a deep sense of identity in relation to her place. It allows her to enrich her teaching with far-reaching connections that provide benefits both for herself and for her students. For her, this is only possible in a small community, where there are connections within connections, and intersecting histories that provide meaningful contexts for teaching and learning, for living, and for her own wellbeing.</p> <p>Kumaravadivelu (2012) identifies the importance of teachers of languages developing deep personal knowledge, in order know themselves, so that they can know what they can offer to their students, and how to understand their students and their needs. For Jenny, personal knowledge extends to seeing herself located in a meaningful context, where she feels at home, and where she can draw on the knowledge of the place, its people and their shared histories. She can use this knowledge to develop ongoing real relationships with her students, in the way Pierson (2013) describes above, for the better learning</p>

	outcomes that Rimm-Kaufman (2014) identifies as arising from this knowledge of students, in positive and supportive relationships.
Theme 3: Dealing with student behaviour: Staying in the job	
<p><i>The benefits of teaching in a rural setting are manifold. Discipline is rarely an issue as students know that I know their parents. At several schools in Sydney, teachers carry mobiles and threaten to ring parents to influence students' behaviour. I have no need of this. I conduct informal parent-teacher interviews weekly in aisle four at the local supermarket and students are well aware of that. I interact with both parents and students in a variety of places outside school: at dance class, at every town event, at social gatherings and, with roles reversed, at the students' places of work. I particularly enjoy being served politely by students who find positive interactions a challenge. And I love seeing students who are often out of uniform working hard in pink t-shirts selling doughnuts.</i></p>	<p>Here Jenny continues to make the case for the benefits of teaching in a rural setting, and the affordances it offers that would be less likely in a large urban context. She begins with one of the greatest reported challenges for new teachers, and one of the reasons most cited for leaving the teaching profession: the problem of managing student behaviour. The literature on student misbehaviour reports high burnout rates, emotional exhaustion, feelings of low self-efficacy, and high levels of teachers leaving the profession in contexts where teachers need to concentrate on high levels of student misbehaviour (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Tsouloupas, Carson, Matthew, Grawitch, & Barber, 2009). Furthermore, where teachers lack feelings of belonging, and report emotional exhaustion, reasons for leaving the profession are positively correlated with (amongst other causes) negative relationships with parents and colleagues and the existence of discipline problems (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Jenny reports that for each of these aspects, she has positive outcomes, due to the size of the community and her connections with parents and colleagues. Hence these aspects actually contribute to her wellbeing rather than impacting negatively, and obviate the need for control of student misbehaviour, which is self-regulated by students who are aware of the connections to their families beyond the classroom, and who are involved in relationships of located trust with their teachers.</p> <p>In an echo of Pierson's (2013) experience, we see how Jenny connects with learners and their families in and out of school, in the supermarket, in the street, and at town events. Pierson utilises the same strategies, and draws on the same relationships Jenny refers to.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>I went on home visits and shopped in the neighborhood stores so I could be certain to run into my students and the folk they lived with. Some of my best parent conferences were held on the produce aisle at the grocery store. Many may consider my actions extreme. I called it "preparation for what might lie ahead." Teaching and learning is often hindered by the details not found in school records... I was being proactive. It is advice I always give to others (Pierson, 2013).</i></p> <p>Further, Jenny notes how roles are reversed when she meets with her students at <i>their</i> places of work, in the part time jobs they hold. Each of these meetings reinforces the relationship, connects her learners to her and her to them, in role reversals that require each to assume different responsibilities, and which require mutual trust. These meetings are real experiences requiring genuine human interactions, which build community, identity and relationships.</p>

Theme 4: Community embracing the German language learning program: Building engagement

One of the most delightful aspects of teaching here however is the enthusiasm with which the community as a whole has embraced German. German visitors are amazed at the extent to which their language is spoken in this small country town: they can't imagine why Australian students would be interested. But it is a matter of pride for our students to use German and they look for opportunities.

While recognising that German is a language from ‘another place’, the success of the program in the school has led to ripples of influence that extend into the wider community and promote eager anticipation to be included in this community of language users. One of the most difficult aspects of languages teaching and learning in Australia, in urban centres as well, but especially in rural settings where there is likely no local community of users of the language, is to indicate to adolescents how the language will be of any use to them in their lives. Through establishment of a successful program, developed over years, this hurdle has been overcome, and the possibility of using the language within the local community, to the growing numbers of users who have learned through the program itself, provides the impetus to engage and to succeed. The cycle of learning and engaging is thus self-perpetuating.

The reputation of German as a language that is good to learn has spread throughout the town. A primary school student approached me at a gathering recently to confirm that I taught German at Armidale High School. She was most enthusiastic and told me that she was coming to my school and was keen to learn 'my' language. Similarly, the siblings of current students are often impatient to start learning German as they have heard that it is really 'cool'. I have an unconventional classroom, with chairs stacked and no desks to be seen. I teach the juniors using active learning strategies, games, songs and film. The students look forward to class, as do I. This enthusiasm is noticed and builds curiosity and anticipation in prospective students.

We know that engagement, through seeing real purposes in using language, in real situations, in real time, is critical for sustained interest and motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Morgan, Kohler, & Harbon, 2010; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009; Ushioda, 2013). Through her program, Jenny has established this level of engagement, with exceptional outcomes. That she has managed to promote the notion of languages learning as ‘cool’ and fun, is a feat little short of miraculous in a nation where the dominance of English has long overshadowed the benefits of learning additional languages.

Jenny’s acute awareness of the need to connect to learners’ interests supports the decades of research and practice stemming from constructivist and motivational theories, from Vygotsky (1978), onwards. All the current literature on languages learning emphasises the need to connect to learners’ interests (e.g. Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Morgan, Kohler & Harbon, 2010; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009), and the Australian Curriculum: Languages (ACARA, 2011; ACARA, 2014) is predicated on this understanding, foregrounding such connections as imperative to allow for the extension into developing intercultural understanding through engagement with another language and culture and recognising the perspectives of others. Jenny’s classroom, and her program and pedagogical ‘stance’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2011) in utilising what works to promote learning, aligns perfectly with this orientation.

Theme 5: Whole school valuing of German language learning: Making learning purposeful

Nearly every student at the school can communicate in German to some extent and they greet me in German when we meet in the school grounds or down the street. They are happy to show off their abilities in front of parents. One of my Saudi students recently hailed me in German and introduced

Though Australia is often referred to as ‘multicultural’, and indeed around 46 per cent of Australians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013), the richness of cultural diversity in Australia is largely undervalued and underutilised, and many migrants in Australia do not feel their heritage, culture or language is publically valued (Clyne, 2008). In conducting an

his mother. He translated for her as she only spoke Arabic, and she invited me to their house. He asked for my phone number in German (we had just covered this) and was very proud, thanking and farewelling me in German rather than English. It was a very multi-cultural exchange and wonderfully rewarding.

exchange in a third language (not Arabic or English, but German), Jenny and her student publically indicated that languages other than English can and are used in Australian country towns, and are valued. For all involved in this short exchange, there was benefit. For Jenny, the satisfaction of engaging with her student in German was evident, as was the invitation to the family's house, which, as we have learned from the passages above, is valued by Jenny as extending the relationship she has with learners and their families. For the student, there was pride not only in using German, but in working across three languages to include his mother in the conversation, and to demonstrate to his mother his capacity to use German effectively. For the mother, there was inclusion, an interactional quality she might rarely feel in a country town with few Arabic speakers. While throughout the world these kinds of interactions across languages are commonplace, in rural settings in Australia, this is less so. Small incidents such as these can, and clearly do, have profound impacts on learning and student engagement, as well as teacher satisfaction and wellbeing.

Students come into the classroom primed by their peers and families to want to learn. I speak German to my students from the outset. When I did this initially (some seven years ago), I met with huge resistance. They couldn't understand me; I was talking gibberish. In fact they called my classes 'Gibberish' instead of 'German'. My current Year 7s by contrast have accepted German as the language of instruction without protest, as they know this is accepted in the wider school community and beyond. We often have German teaching assistants, and have a regular and significant student exchange. Due to these visitors, students hear German spoken fluently in the classroom, around the school, and in the town. It is seen as a real means of communication by people they respect.

That German has come to be accepted as the language of instruction in the German class, and is anticipated with pleasure, is another testament to the benefits of continuity and long-term program development (Scarino et al., 2008). Through establishing a practice that produces results, visible to the community, the task of convincing new learners of its value has already been achieved before they even enter the classroom. Whole school commitment to a languages program is shown by recent research in Australia to be critical to the success of that language program (Fielding & Harbon, forthcoming). In Jenny's school, the whole school commitment is clear, with ramifications for all learners. Students want to be in the German program, come ready to learn, and can see how and with whom they can communicate meaningfully for real purposes. The addition of German teaching assistants to the school, and students on exchange makes more real the use of German, as students see young people using the language, and can begin to imagine futures for themselves, both within and beyond Australia, where they might also use German.

Theme 6: In-country exchanges: A two-way street

Fundamental to the success of German here is the opportunity for in-country experience through school exchange. This was set up by a teacher at a private school in the town; a relatively small community lends itself to inter-institutional cooperation. Students from our schools are partnered with students from Göppingen. The Germans come in June and our students go to Germany in late November. The presence in the school and indeed in the town of several native speakers for a couple of months each year brings German to life. For our students,

In-country experience of using an additional language is recognised as one of the most successful learning strategies, for developing rapid proficiency, engaging with the culture and users of the language, and deepening intercultural understanding leading to long-term engagement with the language and culture (East, 2013; French & Harbon, 2010). Where schools can establish such programs, and preferably in exchange mode, with students from Australia going to the target country and students from the target country coming to Australia, the opportunities for developing deeper engagement with the language and culture are enhanced (East, 2013).

going to Germany is a real rather than a remote prospect. Learning German becomes important and student-driven. Our returning students share their experiences and understandings with junior students: it is model of intercultural peer-teaching and learning.

Jenny points to the exchange program as providing a ‘real’ rather than a ‘remote’ prospect, sharpening the focus on why learning languages is valuable. That the emphasis in the teaching and learning process shifts to being student-driven rather than teacher-driven as a result of the need to know some German, is also significant, as we know that learner-led learning produces meaningful and significant learning outcomes, as well as happy learning environments, and satisfied teachers (Harper & O’Brien, 2012). Peer-teaching, and genuine learner focused learning occurs, as the students bring back reports of their experiences of the people, culture, place and language use, enhancing intercultural understandings, as the learners indicate how they themselves have shifted their understanding through these experiences, which is a key indicator of enhanced intercultural understanding (Morgan, Kohler, & Harbon, 2011; Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009).

The experience our community is able to offer to the German students, of a warm, friendly, open and welcoming town is highly valued. I have had several former exchange students return to volunteer at our school. Our students too, return to Germany post school. Some take their families as the connections they have made are not just student to student. There have been several students over the years who have chosen to live in Germany. Then their parents have to learn German! I hear all this on the grape vine; that is an old-fashioned but extremely efficient form of communication here.

The benefits to the broader community amplify the value of the program, as the German students encounter and engage with the local community, and are welcomed in displays of mutual friendliness- a characteristic small communities in Australia are renowned for, and a positive attribute of rural positions identified in the literature (Hudson & McCluskey, 2013). In addition, when local students return to Germany and take their families, the program is strengthened in the school and in the community. Again, we see how the size of the rural setting enhances these possibilities, with rewards for the teacher, students, their families and the wider community.

Theme 7: Lifelong connections

I really appreciate keeping up with former students through parents and siblings. I sometimes meet them when they come home for the holidays. It is gratifying to see first-hand the benefits that learning a language has brought to their lives. Of course it is great if the students achieve high marks in their final exams, and wonderful if they continue their study of languages. The rewards that the students gain though are often personal rather than purely academic. The relationships they forge, the connections they make, and the experiences they enjoy all merge to strengthen them as individuals and to enrich our community as a whole. While this undoubtedly happens in cities as well as in a rural context, I am able to see the ripples that my small contribution makes. I feel valued and appreciated by people and in a place that I truly know.

In her conclusion, Jenny returns to the major themes of connection with place, the importance of relationships, and rewards for the teacher of rural teaching positions, realised over extended time periods. She feels valued and appreciated, which in turn contributes to her own sense of wellbeing, and to job satisfaction, which we know is critical to remaining in the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

If we consider the checklist of personal and professional attractions for teaching in rural settings identified by Sharplin (2002), we can tick virtually every one for Jenny. She has increased responsibility, as not only the coordinator of German in the school, but as a champion for its learning in the school and in the community. She enjoys the small school size, as she knows all the students and their families, and has deeper knowledge of students and their families because of the size of the community and her interaction with them in the community, outside as well as in school. She demonstrates how she both seeks and thrives on being a member of the community, and of relating her own children’s experiences within this community, as well as to the experiences of her students.

	<p>In summary, Jenny's narrative shows a network of connections that are important to her professionally and personally. These include connections with place, with learners, with their families, with the local community, with the German-using community and Germany itself, and with young people moving between her home town and Germany. These connections are long-term, sustainable and rewarding. Benefits for her students' learning are clear, also, and she models the fit between teaching and learning aspirations as detailed in education policy and curricula, and lived and demonstrated experience.</p>
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RECAPITULATION

Jenny

Both the process and the results of collaborating on this paper have been overwhelmingly positive for me. I enjoyed reflecting on my teaching practice and the choices I have made; it is rewarding to share experiences with others as often we work in relative isolation. No-one knows what we do except those on the receiving end. It was good also to consider the positives as, inevitably in the school setting, we focus on the challenges and difficulties and forget at times how lucky we are. It was valuable to have my everyday experiences placed in the context of academic research and affirming that research findings are borne out in my practice. I would like to recapitulate (true to sonata form) the notion that 'practitioner research is vital for reform', as so often the voice of experienced teachers is lost or undervalued. Dialogue and cooperation between academics and teachers gives depth and relevance to current research. It is in this space that a conversation about excellence in education is most fruitful.

Hopefully I have conveyed something of the joy of teaching in a rural setting and prospective teachers will consider the benefits and importance of rural education. It is an ambition of mine that we may move away from the idea of rural disadvantage and come instead to embrace 'rural advantage'. It has been a privilege to take part in this sonata and to feel both heard and valued.

Anne-Marie

The privilege of working with a teacher who can so clearly articulate the benefits and advantages of her work, across a range of significant and important dimensions, in a personal and evocative voice, has been a source of great pleasure for me. What Jenny says so eloquently is more powerful for prospective teachers considering a career in a rural setting than any analysis of statistics of participation and the like presented by university researchers alone.

The dissemination of practitioner knowledge remains an under-utilised resource in the preparation of teachers and as research in the educational literature. It is hoped that more such work will continue to occur and be reported. In addition, ongoing inquiry and dissemination of the knowledge and insights of in-service teachers will provide benefits not only for prospective teachers, but for teachers in schools, as they continue to engage reflexively with their pedagogies and practices, and to consider the critical complementary issues of job satisfaction, wellbeing and sustainability of the profession. Providing opportunities for such research to occur and to be shared is the collective responsibility of schools and school leaders, teachers, university researchers and university educators of pre-service teachers; as well as governments, through education authorities and education instrumentalities and agencies. Through collaborative efforts, much can and should be achieved.

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