PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING IN TWO TYPES OF ISOLATED AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: AN ANALYSIS OF FOUR DIMENSIONS OF RURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The concept "rural" in Australia is capable of different meanings according to the state (e.g. Tasmania versus Queensland) and in terms of location in relation to major centres of population. In a study in two rural Queensland secondary schools different perceptions of teaching were found: rural school A is located in the western interior of the state while rural school B is in the hinterland of two large coastal cities. Four dimensions of rural education are explored - in terms of teacher perceptions of: (i) relationships between themselves and their students together with the local communities; (ii) the state department of education; (iii) the (largely urban) teaching profession and (iv) professional satisfaction. It is argued that perceptions of teaching in isolated communities are determined by such rural-urban relationships and that the quality of education in rural communities is shaped by such considerations.

For nearly two decades a variety of reports (Karmel, 1973; Schools Commission, 1975; Fitzgerald, 1976) have designated rural education a disadvantaged sector of Australian society. In a country as large as Australia, however, rural education has a variety of meanings (Behrens, 1977): in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, western New South Wales and the Northern Territory it refers to education in schools that are isolated from major centres of population by vast distances; in Victoria, Tasmania and eastern New South Wales, where patterns of settlement are relatively close, it refers to education beyond the major cities.

Defining the concept "rural" has troubled social scientists for decades (Bealer, 1975; 1983, Falk and Pinhey, 1978; Friedland, 1982; Gilbert, 1982; Lantz and Murphy, 1978; Miller and Luloff, 1981; Picou, et al 1978) and this, on reflection, has been a pointless diversion. It has been claimed (Nash, 1980) that:

> "... The problems of rural education are not different in kind from those in urban areas, and are certainly not brought about by any supposedly necessary characteristics of rural life, but are to be understood as determined by the relationships which exist between the urban centres and the rural areas." (emphasis mine).

This is reflected in the teaching profession according to Turney, et al (1980):

> "... the majority of difficulties confronting teachers in inner-city schools will probably be little different in nature from those faced by teachers in suburban or even rural schools ..."

This paper will explore the orientation to teaching of teachers in two different types of rural schools in Queensland. The first school (School A) is located in the western interior of the state in a small settlement and is isolated from other communities by considerable distances. The second rural school (School B) is located in a relatively closely settled area

in the hinterland of two major coastal cities. In this way A and B represent two types of rural Australian schools in terms of their location in relation to urban areas.

A variety of studies have drawn attention to difficulties rural teachers face in Australia (Adsett, 1974; Australian Teachers' Federation, 1976; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, 1988; Cusack, 1974; Green, 1967; McGaw, et al; 1975; Reid, 1969; Steven 1981; 1983; Storey, 1969; Taylor, 1969; 1970). The author's ethnographic work in school A, followed by research in school B in the late 1980's as part of a visit to Australia, suggest that perceptions of teaching in rural communities is influenced by the extent of the geographic isolation that is experienced.

Teaching in remote areas has never been as popular in Australia as employment in urban schools. Consequently, a characteristic of teachers in many rural schools has been their youthfulness and, associated with this, minimal professional experience.

Living conditions in many outback areas have been seen as less than desirable by many young teachers who are used to urban lifestyles (Schools Commission, 1975; Fitzgerald, 1976; Stevens, 1981) and this has contributed to their feelings of alienation from the communities they are expected to serve. Living conditions have in the past also contributed to the desire of many young teachers to leave rural schools as soon as possible (Turney, 1980; Stevens, 1981) although this has sometimes been interpreted at local level as lack of professional commitment.

A feature of teaching in rural Queensland secondary schools has been lack of professional contact at an early (and therefore critical) stage of a teacher's career. Rural teachers do not usually have experienced colleagues to turn to locally with their professional problems and, as a result, many lack guidance in undertaking such basic tasks as choosing textbooks, coping with student assessment, teaching unfamiliar areas of the curriculum and managing unwilling students. Young and inexperienced rural teachers often develop very good understandings of the state education system which exiled them to remote parts of the country and learn how to persuade its officials to transfer them to urban classrooms at the earliest opportunity. (Recent economic conditions in Australia have, however, provided more stability in terms of staffing the country's rural schools.)

Many teachers in rural Queensland secondary schools are young, unsettled, unsure of their professional directions, lacking in guidance, and, in many cases, resentful of what they perceive to be their exile from city life. These teachers are likely to be urban rather than rural-oriented as they consider their families, colleagues, employers (the State Education Department), and careers. The nature of the relationship between rural teachers and urban centres in schools A and B is described below using a modified version of an instrument developed by Campbell (1975). Teachers in rural schools A and B (N=24) were all from urban backgrounds. As urban teachers working in rural areas four distinct but inter-related relationships were perceived in their orientation to teaching: relationships with (a) rural students and their communities, (b) the Queensland Department of Education in Brisbane, (c) other members of the teaching profession throughout Australia, and (d) their own assessments of themselves as urban teachers in rural schools and their futures in the profession.

Teachers were asked, by questionnaire, about the nature of their relationships with students and the rural communities in which they lived. The following table shows the extent of the concern that was expressed in each school.

TABLE 1
TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

	SCHOOL A		SCHOOL B	
	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4
I feel that the attitude of students makes my job impossible	3 2 5 2	3 2 2 5	1 6 5 0	1 5 4 1
I feel that my job interferes with my social life	5 3 4 0	7 2 3 0	8 3 1 0	7 1 1 2
I feel I am prevented from establishing appropriate relationships with students	4 4 1 3	6 2 2 2	6 4 2 0	5 4 1 1
I feel that the status I am accorded by the community is not commensurate with the importance of my job	6 2 3 1	6 2 3 1	5 2 5 0	4 4 3 0

Key   (a) Frequency   (b) Concern

4   This is of very great concern to me   4   I experience this all the time
3   This is of moderate concern to me   3   I experience this sometimes
2   This is of slight concern to me   2   I experience this rarely
1   This is of no concern to me   1   I never experience this

These responses indicate that in the more remote school (School A) teachers found it difficult to separate their profession from their social lives although in each location, only a minority of teachers found this to be a matter of concern. Many of the teachers explained that they did not have social lives in the communities in which they lived as they either left town and went to a city in the weekends (most of these were in School B) or mixed largely with each other out of school hours.

More teachers in School A than in School B felt that they were unable to establish appropriate relationships with students suggesting that in addition to the remote location in which they lived, a greater measure of professional isolation was experienced. Several women teachers in School A expressed feelings of alienation about the life-styles they observed in the outback and in particular, concern about the subordination of members of their sex in virtually all aspects of life. A major barrier to establishing close relationships with people by young women teachers was their consciousness of their higher educations and the incongruity of this in the environments in which they found themselves. Few of the women residents in these communities had jobs and none had professions. Young, single, tertiary-educated women teachers found little companionship and often experienced loneliness and strong feelings of alienation from the communities in which they taught. Fewer teachers in the more remote school (School A) noted that they were not accorded appropriate status by the community. In School B, teachers were not the sole professionals in the community and many respondents felt that they were accorded a lower social status than was expected.

Teachers in Schools A and B gave the following responses to questions on the nature of their relationship with their employer, the Queensland Department of Education.

TABLE 2
RURAL TEACHERS AND THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

	SCHOOL A		SCHOOL B	
	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4
I feel I am a pawn in an insensitive bureaucracy	0 2 5 5	1 3 2 6	2 3 6 1	4 1 4 2
Conditions under which I teach prevent me from doing a professional ob	1 5 4 2	2 3 3 4	4 1 4 3	3 2 3 3
I am unclear on the scope and responsibilities of my job	5 4 2 1	4 4 2 2	9 3 0 0	7 3 1 0
I'll not be able to satisfy conflicting demands	5 6 1 0	4 5 1 2	7 5 0 0	7 4 0 0
I do not know what the Education Department thinks of me	2 3 5 2	5 2 5 0	5 3 4 0	5 3 2 1
I can't get information needed to carry out my job	3 5 3 1	3 3 4 2	4 6 2 0	4 4 2 1
I feel frustrated by the magnitude of the task and the inadequacy of resources	4 4 4 0	3 2 6 1	4 4 4 0	4 2 3 2

Teachers in Schools A and B expressed different attitudes towards their employer. In the more remote school there were stronger feelings about the insensitivity of the Department and its officers. Within the decentralised administrative structure of education in Australian states, School B was relatively close to the regional offices of the Department, whereas school A had few visits from either central or regional representatives and was geographically remote from both. It is not surprising therefore to find that teachers in School A felt less well informed about the scope of their responsibilities and indicated in the above responses, less understanding of how they were regarded as teachers by Departmental officers. Almost half the teachers in School A pointed out that this was a matter of concern of them.

A third of the teachers in School A indicated that they found difficulty in getting necessary information to do their jobs properly and stated that this was a matter of concern. This was not seen as a problem or a matter of concern in less remote School B.

Three: Relationships Between Rural Teachers and the Teaching Profession

A range of questions about how teachers in each rural school perceived themselves in relation to other teachers (most of whom teach in urban schools) provides insight into their day-to-day professional relationships.

TABLE 3
RURAL TEACHERS AND THE TEACHING PROFESSION

	SCHOOL A		SCHOOL B	
	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4	Frequency 1 2 3 4	Concern 1 2 3 4
I have too little say in matters of curriculum and teaching methods	4 4 2 2	3 2 6 1	3 5 2 2	4 3 3 1
I feel overwhelmed by new teaching demands made upon me	4 5 2 1	4 3 3 1	4 2 5 1	3 3 4 1
Classes are too large to enable me to do a professional job	5 6 1 0	7 4 1 0	4 4 3 1	3 2 4 2
I have too little authority in the school to carry out responsibilities	5 4 1 2	2 2 5 3	8 3 1 0	7 3 1 0
I feel I am not fully qualified to handle my job	5 4 3 0	4 3 5 0	6 5 0 1	6 4 0 1
I feel unable to influence the Principal's decisions that affect me	5 3 3 1	3 6 2 1	6 5 0 1	7 2 2 0
I feel I may not be liked and accepted by the people I work with	0 3 5 4	1 3 6 2	7 5 0 0	6 5 0 0
I do not know what the people I work with expect of me	5 6 1 0	3 5 4 0	8 4 0 0	4 6 0 0
The amount of work I have to do may interfere with how well it is done	1 1 6 4	1 3 4 4	2 3 6 1	2 2 5 2
I have to do things on the job against my better judgement	1 2 8 1	1 2 3 6	4 5 3 0	2 7 1 1
I feel disheartened by lack of commitment and low morale of my colleagues in the service	3 3 6 0	2 0 4 6	6 3 3 0	5 3 3 0

Teachers in School B reported more new teaching demands on them than those in School A. This is a matter that requires further investigation but the closer contact with Departmental officers that has been that has been noted above together with the closer relationships with students experienced in school B should be considered in seeking an explanation. Teachers who are not well known in their communities are less likely to have increased demands made upon them. Teachers in the more remote school expressed less confidence in their abilities to handle their jobs which again can be related to the lower level of contact they had with the Queensland Department of Education. Almost half the teachers in School A were concerned about this.

Teachers in School A expressed stronger feelings of powerlessness in influencing their Principals than those in School B, and, although this was possibly related to the personalities of the head teachers in each school, it contributes to the overall picture of professional isolation experienced by teachers in the more remote school.

A major difference between Schools A and B was that 75% of teachers in School A indicated low morale including not being liked by their colleagues; this can in part be explained by their responses to the last three questions in the above table. Most teachers in School A indicated that the quality of their teaching suffered because too much work was required, and, of particular significance, that they were required to do things against their better judgement. For most, this meant being unsure of what to do and having no experienced professional at hand to whom to turn for help. Easier access to both professional and lay assistance in School B removed a degree of professional anxiety.

Four: Professional Satisfaction and the Future

Teachers in Schools A and B were asked to rate their responses to the following questions:

TABLE 4
SATISFACTION WITH TEACHING AS A CAREER

All Things Considered, How Satisfying Do You Find Teaching As A Career?		School A	School B
(a)	Highly Satisfying	3	2
(b)	Moderately Satisfying	5	7
(c)	Neutral	1	1
(d)	Moderately Dissatisfying	3	1
(e)	Highly Dissatisfying	0	0

TABLE 5
SATISFACTION WITH TEACHING IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

How Satisfying Do You Find Teaching In A Rural Community?		School A	School B
(a)	Highly Satisfying	4	6
(b)	Moderately Satisfying	4	4
(c)	Neutral	1	2
(d)	Moderately Dissatisfying	3	0
(e)	Highly Dissatisfying	0	0

TABLE 6
THREE YEAR PLAN

All Things Considered, What Do You Think You Will Be Doing Three Years From Now?		School A	School B
(a)	Retired from Teaching	1	1
(b)	Teaching in a Primary School	0	2
(c)	Teaching in a Secondary School	8	5
(d)	Lecturing in a Tertiary Institute	0	1
(e)	Working in Educational Administration	0	0
(f)	Working as a Specialist in Education (e.g. Counsellor, teacher of handicapped, etc.	0	1
(g)	Working in Another Position Out of Education	2	1
(h)	Full-time Housewife	1	1
(i)	Working in this Rural School	0	0
(j)	Working in Another Rural School	0	0

TABLE 7
INTENTION TO REMAIN AT A RURAL SCHOOL

Would You Remain in this or Another Rural School if you Could Not Secure a Position of Your Choice?	School A	School B
Yes	2	1
No	10	11

The above responses indicate that most teachers in both schools found teaching in a rural community satisfying although most of the dissatisfaction that was expressed came from teachers in School A. Most teachers saw their futures in the profession but none intended to remain in a rural area. Almost all of the teachers in each school responded that they would not remain in their present positions if they did not get the jobs that they wanted. These responses have an ominous significance for the future of rural Australian schools.

Conclusion

Teachers in both Schools A and B faced double isolation: not only were they sent to live and work in remote parts of the country, in doing so they were isolated from their profession and their employers. It appears from the above responses that the degree of isolation from major centres of population as well as from the (largely urban) teaching profession shapes the perceptions of rural teachers. If the responses to the above questions can be replicated in other Australian communities it will be necessary to consider a Perspective of rural schools based on the nature of their relationships with urban areas. The position of teachers in rural communities is often a significant one (Maclaine 1966, Lauglo 1982) and its effectiveness can be improved by knowing more about the nature of the tasks that are performed as well as difficulties that are experienced. Unless the nature and the extent of rural teachers' isolation is recognised, it is unlikely that steps can be taken to improve the position of rural students. Nash's (1980) thesis that the characteristics of rural life "are to be understood as determined by the relationships which exist between the urban centres and the rural areas" has immediate implications for teachers in isolated Australian schools. An important dimension of rural life is the nature of the education that is provided locally. The responses of the teachers in Schools A and B indicate that the quality of their relationships with the rest of their profession, with rural

students and their communities as well as with their employer are all important aspects of the provision of education. Overall, in the more remote school, School A, teachers' professional concerns were more acute than those expressed in School B suggesting that the education they provided was influenced by the nature of the relationships they had with urban Australia.

Research into rural education has been dominated by issues of disadvantage (Edington, 1970) inequality of opportunity (Fyfield, 1970; Verco and Whiteman, 1970) and concern about the quality of schools provided for outback children (Edgar 1978, Schools Commission, 1975; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1987; Turney, et al, 1980). It has been pointed out that a major problem in considering rural education in Australia is the existence of a myth that the rural minority are somehow "basically 'different' from the city people" (Bessant, 1978). A major report however noted:

> "One problem which emerges in rural schools is that in most cases the content of schooling is not tailored to students' needs but simply replicates that of urban schools. This is justified by teachers who have been trained to accept the policy that general curricula, universally available, constitute the best basis for learning and preparation for the future ... it seems that the background and cultural reality of country children are ignored." (Fitzgerald, 1976)

The challenge to rural educators is to reduce the effects of isolation for themselves while choosing between the position taken by Bessant (1978) that rural students are not "basically 'different' from city people" and that expressed by Fitzgerald (1976) that the "background and cultural reality" of country children should not be ignored.

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