BUSH TRACKS: VIEWING TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF LEADERSHIP IN RURAL SCHOOLS THROUGH A CONTEXTUAL LENS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the difficulties inherent in staffing rural schools it is increasingly common for early career teachers (ECTs) to experience school leadership roles. Such opportunities include a range of responsibilities such as establishing school and curriculum direction and providing leadership in pedagogy, assessment, and school-community relations. The accelerated progression of early career teachers impacts on the overall nature of school leadership in rural schools and creates unique pathways and experiences of school administration. This paper draws from interviews with eighteen educators regarding their experiences of leadership in rural schools. Four core categories emerged from the transcribed interview data: Leadership Opportunities; Responsibilities; the Personal and the Professional; and Fishbowl. These categories are presented along with quotes from participants that together construct an understanding of the opportunities and challenges that accompany early career experiences of leadership roles. Findings are interpreted using a "contextual lens" on leadership that emphasises issues of proximity and transparency as they relate to leadership in rural schools.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the accelerated leadership opportunities available for teachers at schools in rural and remote locations. Exploring these accelerated leadership opportunities comprises part of the broader Bush Tracks research agenda that focuses on rural pedagogies, the challenges associated with teachers moving or returning to rural communities and particular issues that relevant to early career educators in rural teaching contexts. An important theme pursued as part of the Bush Tracks research agenda is the exploration of teachers' transitions from pre-service students to beginning teachers through to experienced practitioners in isolated rural and regional communities.

Rural schools present particular challenges in terms of staffing. Though consistent and well-planned staffing profiles are the ideal, staffing patterns in rural contexts tend to be inconsistent and unpredictable with many teachers in remote schools employed under contract. Of these contracted teachers, many do not complete or elect not to renew their contracts despite financial incentives such as subsidised housing and other 'hardship' allowances (Baills et al. 2002; Yarrow et al. 1999). The experience of teaching in rural and remote schools is described by many teachers as isolating both personally and professionally (McCormack & Thomas 2002; Sharplin 2002). As a result, schools in rural areas are vulnerable to staffing shortfalls, difficulties in securing casual teacher assistance, and a lack of depth of leadership (Boylan et al. 1993).

With the teaching population aging, it has been predicted that the retirement of teachers in leadership roles within the next five to ten years will precipitate a 'crisis in staffing' (Bourke & Lockie 2001; McClean 2002; Preston 2000; 2001), particularly in the disciplines of science, mathematics, and special education (Appleton 1998; Herrington & Herrington 2001; Yarrow et al. 1999). Similar staffing situations have been identified

in the United States (Bolich 2001; Brewster & Railsback 2001) and in New Zealand (Lang 1999).

In rural settings, difficulties in securing long-term staff have often resulted in accelerated professional progression for beginning teachers (Lunn 1997). Specifically, many teachers who work in rural and remote areas have been asked to provide school or curriculum-based leadership in advance of usual timeframes (Hammond 2001). This leadership takes different forms ranging from formal executive positions to curriculum coordination and work within professional associations, as well as school-based roles (for example, acting as an Assistant Principal; stage coordinator of Key Learning Area programming; office holder in the local branch of a professional organisation; sports coordinator; welfare committee chair).

This research investigated the experience of teachers in rural schools in north-western New South Wales through interviews conducted as part of the Bush Tracks Collective's focus on issues of importance to teachers in rural contexts and, in particular, teachers' transitions from pre-service students to beginning teachers through to experienced practitioners in rural and regional communities. The research question considered for this study was: *What opportunities and challenges accompany teachers' early transitions to school leadership roles?*

METHOD

As part of the research programme associated with the Bush Tracks Collective, 250 surveys were sent to schools in the northwest area of New South Wales. This geographic area is served most directly by the University of New England (UNE) in terms of professional development. Schools in this 'footprint area' also cooperate most extensively with UNE in providing practicum placements for teacher education students. The surveys distributed were designed to elicit educators' experiences of teaching in rural contexts and to gather information about the possible influence of previous teaching appointments on respondents' current views of rural pedagogy. These data are being analysed and will be the basis of future Bush Tracks publications. At the end of the survey individuals were invited to participate in a subsequent interview that would provide an opportunity for them to elaborate further on their responses to the questionnaire.

Seventeen teachers indicated their willingness to be interviewed by researchers associated with the Bush Tracks project. Subsequently, members of the Bush Tracks Collective arranged a time and location for the interviews with participants. All interviews were conducted at the participants' schools. Travelling to the rural and remote communities and schools where the teachers lived and worked provided meaningful contextual data for the researchers who were interested in exploring what it means to teach in rural schools and themselves had varying levels of teaching experience in rural contexts.

As the Bush Tracks Collective is based at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales interviews were conducted within a radius of approximately 500 kilometres from the UNE. The teachers interviewed and schools visited were predominantly located in small towns with populations of less than 1,000. Some schools visited were considered 'remote' and a significant number of communities included a

high proportion of Indigenous students. Most schools visited attracted Federal Country Area Programme (CAP) funding opportunities because of their distance from major centres and the level of disadvantage of their student populations.

All 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted by pairs of researchers with one researcher taking the role of interviewer and the other recording field notes. Interview questions targeted information about the school context, teaching challenges faced in the particular school context, opportunities for school leadership and current challenges faced by the teachers. The interview questions were open-ended and followed by probes when it was considered necessary to explore interviewees' responses more fully.

The teachers interviewed represent a cross section of teachers with regard to gender, age, background, and current leadership positions (see Appendix 1). Their level of classroom teaching experience ranged from one year to fifteen years.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then scrutinised for thematic responses using a Grounded Theory approach to guide the data-analytic process (Cohen & Manion 1992). The first stage of data analysis involved identifying categories and their properties using open coding. The categories were then recombined and new connections made between the categories using axial coding (Fassinger 2005). The final step of analysis, selective coding, resulted in a small number of core categories, or themes. These themes represent the data such that theoretical saturation is reached and no additional data are found to enrich the core categories (Fassinger 2005; Glasser 1992).

The categories that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts were labelled: *Leadership Opportunities*; *Responsibilities*; the *Personal and the Professional*; and *Fishbowl Effects*. Overall, these categories encapsulated the major challenges inherent in teaching in rural settings viewed through the two distinct and interrelated perspectives of proximity and transparency. The metaphor of viewing leadership through "conceptual lenses of varying focal lengths" provides a flexible framework for understanding the vagaries of leadership where responsibilities and demands were often sharply in focus and the support of families and familiar circumstances were often distant and poorly defined.

CATEGORIES

The results of this study are presented through a description of the categories that emerged from the data and illustrated by italicised quotes that convey the teachers' voices. The quotes are attributed to pseudonyms and are annotated with the years of teaching experience and the leadership roles of the participants.

As a brief overview, the first category of *Leadership Opportunities* pertained to the possible leadership roles available to early career teachers (ECTs) in rural contexts. The second category, *Fear and Possibilities*, related to teachers' emotions in the context of teaching in rural schools. The third category, the *Personal and the Professional*, was concerned with isolation in terms of family and community pressures as they relate to the role of teachers. The final category of *Fishbowl Effects* was more intimately concerned with visibility and the social pressures of teaching in a small community.

LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

In many cases, teachers were new to the location and relatively new to the teaching profession when they were offered leadership roles in rural schools. One of the major factors precipitating opportunities for leadership was the generally transient staff profile of colleagues already in these kinds of positions. Because teachers work closely in small schools, early career teachers were able to critically analyse the advantages and disadvantages of taking on leadership roles from closely observing their colleagues. For some ECTs the timing was right to take the opportunities offered. Others declined because the responsibilities and stresses that accompany leadership positions in schools were very clear to them.

Joan, an assistant principal with 10 years experience, was offered an accelerated path to formal school leadership. In the interview, she described how one year after beginning her first fulltime job she became an executive teacher and another year later took on the role of assistant principal. Joan acknowledged that she had never imagined becoming assistant principal within this timeframe. She said, "It was just something that was given, like an opportunity that was presented to me and I thought, 'Why not?'" This opportunity, however, prompted her to consider other leadership positions in other schools and has led to experiences that may otherwise not have occurred until much later in her career.

Not all teachers, however, choose to take up the opportunities that are offered. Leanne, in her second year as a teacher, was offered the position of Principal at the school where she was teaching. Her reaction was that, "I thought they were joking!" She declined to take this opportunity because, as she expressed it:

> *I am not into climbing a ladder. When I was out there and saw what principals had to do, it turned me off completely. All the red tape, all the tasks, the protocols, all that stuff that people don't see. That was enough for me! (Leanne, 6 years experience)*

Being able to see the various aspects of a leader's professional life on a day-to-day basis clearly influenced Leanne's decision not to take up an opportunity for formal leadership. Similarly, another reason for declining leadership opportunities put forward by early career teachers was that they could look ahead and see the 'cost' of becoming a Principal or Assistant Principal. For example, a second year out teacher, Christine, saw the opportunities and pathways for leadership presented to her but she also acknowledged their toll. She recalled that, "My deputy . . . says to me sometimes, 'Oh, it's not worth the money!'"

Another negative related to formal leadership roles mentioned by participants in this study was that in the vast majority of rural schools, taking on leadership responsibilities is in addition to classroom responsibilities. The sometimes unrealistic demands accompanying being both a classroom teacher and a school leader were acknowledged by Christine who reported that her supervisor had told her, "She'd like to go back to just being a classroom teacher."

Those school administrators who had taken up early leadership opportunities reflected on the need to balance the dual roles of teacher and leader. Thelma, a Principal with 13 years of teaching experience explained, "I work 90% as a classroom teacher now and 10% as a Principal. The rest doesn't get done." Kerry, a Principal with over 10 years experience recalled how when she first became Principal:

> *I almost had a nervous breakdown because I wanted everything to be just so and had all this vision . . . I would say, 'Oh, I've got to do this, I've got to do that'.*

Kerry went on to explain that she had now been in the role for two years and felt more comfortable. She said, "I still get uptight about things . . . You're always in a dither about what's important, it seems."

Although teachers did not always pursue formal administrative leadership roles, most were called upon to be informal school-based leaders in their early years of teaching. Jane, for example, explained that "Due to the large turnover we all have to do something extra. I'm sports organiser [in] my second year out from university." With even less classroom experience, Josie, after six months as a teacher found herself in the position that "Because we are under review we all needed to do Key Learning Area programmes, so I'm it for HSIE. I'm Curriculum Coordinator for HSIE!"

Whether the leadership opportunity was formal or informal, participants in this study reported that a particular challenge for them was the instability of staffing in rural and remote schools. For example, one teacher, Izabel, noted that "This is my third year here and there is not one teacher or member of the Executive still on staff who was here when I arrived."

An implication related to staff transience in rural schools is that teachers new to leadership positions face particular challenges when trying to establish mentoring relationships with colleagues. Kerry, an experienced teacher and Principal, noted ruefully that when she started teaching, "I had three supervisors in three years." The teachers interviewed generally looked to their Principals for mentoring with varying degrees of success. Leanne described her experiences with two contrasting leadership role models and their impact on her development as a school leader:

> *The first Principal, he was fantastic. Probably one of the nicest Principals in the district . . . He was very organised, very supportive, would really value my input about what money to spend in what area. We did a lot of resourcing, when I came. There weren't enough copies of books and things like that. I was able to set that up."* (Leanne, 6 years experience)

This positive experience, however, contrasted with Leanne's experience of a casual teacher who was appointed as Acting Principal:

> *He wasn't someone who was in it for the love of the job. He would come to school late and would leave early and I did a lot of his work. And also I found that really tough, because when he came in, a lot of the systems that I set up with the first principal just fell apart, and all*

that hard work was just gone in front of me, and I didn't like that at all, and we clashed. Even though we were quite good friends before. Yeah. It was really hard." (Leanne, 6 years experience)

It was evident from the interviews that some teachers took up opportunities as they arose, even though they may have doubted their capacity to take on certain roles. Other teachers articulated the need to follow a more measured approach to leadership by first gaining expertise as a classroom teacher. Christine, a teacher of two year's experience, explained that while there was encouragement from her supervisors to consider formal leadership roles, she felt that, "At the moment I'm just happy fine tuning the skills – I'm enjoying being a class teacher. I don't want to be an AP yet. I just want to enjoy being a class teacher." She observed that in her experience people sometimes took on leadership positions without realising the responsibility that was associated with those roles. Christine went on to reflect that as far as her career is concerned, "I'll move when I'm ready .There's always the hope that I might be a principal one day."

One Principal interviewed also explained that she also made the decision to move into a leadership role at a time of her own choosing. Thelma's was based on a realisation that she wanted to make a difference and was now ready to do so. She commented that:

I got to a point in my career where I didn't agree with a lot of the decisions that were being made on behalf of the children. Because they weren't being made for children, but for teachers. That's one of the reasons that I took on being a Principal, because I thought, well, then I am my own boss. (Thelma, 13 years experience, Principal)

RESPONSIBILITIES

The absolute responsibility that accompanies leadership positions in rural schools was another theme evident throughout the interview responses. Fear, as an emotion, was even mentioned by some participants as a response to situations of vulnerability and real or imagined threat. Michael, a Principal with 26 years of teaching experience noted that school leaders were becoming more exposed to threats over the years as a consequence of increasing devolution of responsibility from the Department of Education to individual Principals. Michael explained that he felt, "The buck does stop with me. It doesn't stop with the Department any more. If I don't act, I'm liable."

This quote and others like it suggest the level of ultimate responsibility and financial, managerial and administrative accountability that is associated with being a school Principal in an isolated setting. This responsibility can leave individuals feeling vulnerable. For example, Trisha, a teaching Principal, admitted that, "I was OK about the teaching but the admin worried me." Trisha's comment was typical of other statements made by participants with regard to the worries they had as school leaders about safety issues, staff morale, and their own discomfort with the intimacy that can accompany teaching in small communities.

Later in his interview, Michael went on to emphasise that, "The most important thing for me, is that, if things go wrong out here, there is nobody else to blame except myself." This concern about being ultimately responsible was echoed by Leanne who recalled that during her time at a remote rural school:

I dreaded feeling ultimately responsible, especially about the safety of the kids, because there were no doctors, hospitals or ambulances near by. I found that terrifying, especially when I was there on my own. With things like snake bites. The flying doctor took at least half an hour to come out there. If you had a child with an asthma attack or anything like that, you know? I really disliked being there on my own, and I did everything to avoid it." (Leanne, 6 years experience)

Having assumed leadership roles in rural schools, many of the participants reported that they faced considerable challenges in developing and maintaining support networks and finding effective ways of working within their communities. One memorable image illustrating this struggle to establish a foundation of support was provided by Thelma. She described an image she had of herself coping with the responsibilities of her position in the following way:

I was building a pyramid from the top down... I had nothing underneath me, and here I was sitting at the top, desperately trying to fill in all the bricks underneath me." (Thelma, 13 years experience, Principal)

THE PERSONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

The third theme that emerged from the data relates to the interplay between the personal and the professional lives of teachers. Participants articulated a need to keep some distance between these two aspects of their lives while recognising that in smaller rural communities such distance was sometimes difficult to maintain. Though this category related to both single and partnered teachers, particular issues were described by teachers who had moved to small rural communities with their families.

Thelma, a principal with 13 years experience, recalled the difficulty of living with her family in housing provided by the NSW Department of Education and Training. She stated that, "School actually really started to encroach on our family life . . . because I was actually living right next door to the school. There was no way I could escape."

Thelma also identified a specific issue experienced by teachers who are parents in rural communities. She explained that community members can exert pressure on teachers to have their own children enrolled in the same school in which they teach. While Thelma understood the position of community members, she had to make a difficult decision when her children encountered bullying at her school. Thelma's subsequent decision to move her children to another school was judged harshly. She recalled that;

In the end, I just said 'No, enough is enough' and I took the children out of the school. And I basically said to the parents and the community, that I was finding it too difficult to teach my own children. And that was why they were moved. They didn't know about the bullying issue." (Thelma, 13 years experience, Principal)

In this instance, a parent's decisions about the education of her own children was complicated by her position as school principal and advocate for her own school. A distinction between family and professional lives was difficult to attain for the teacher and also for the members of the community.

FISHBOWL EFFECTS

The closeness of the school community to teachers and school leaders is the basis for the category labelled 'Fishbowl' to indicate how the lives of some teachers were constantly under scrutiny within their communities. This produced positive and negative effects. On a positive note, for some teachers, particularly those in leadership roles, the closeness of the community meant that educators developed a good understanding of the context in which students lived. They also had the opportunity to foster effective professional relationships with students, parents and carers through community activities.

Stuart, a head teacher with 13 years experience, explained that he felt that:

> *You're actually part of the community. It's not just when you're at school. And it's even more so in a small community because everything that you do, you're in the looking glass.*

There is clearly, however, a tension inherent in being constantly 'on show'. While being part of a community was cited as a positive experience for most teachers in rural schools, some described how that same closeness to the community could make life difficult. As Tammy, an Assistant Principal with seven years' experience said, "Sometimes I think it is the community. The community and expectations can make it really hard for you." Trisha, a principal with five year's experience, noted that the community members around her were keen observers of all her decisions as a school leader and that, in general, they were forgiving of her occasional mistakes. "But just don't make too many mistakes!" she laughed.

Thelma, reflecting on teachers as a visible part of the community, offered her observations that:

> *I think in small schools, you have to develop respect, as a teacher, and as a principal, really quickly with the kids and the parents, so that everybody knows where they stand. But first of all, you have to show how much you respect them, the community, and their values. Even if you don't agree with their values, you respect their rights to them.*
> (Thelma, 13 years experience, Principal)

Many participants related similar incidents that underscored the point that as Tammy (7 years experience, Assistant Principal) observed, "Simply living in a community is not the same as being a part of that community."

SUMMARY

In summary, many of the teachers interviewed discussed the difficulties they experienced balancing work and family demands, the pressures and pleasures they felt as a result of living in a small community, and the challenges that were an integral part of their roles as rural educators and school leaders.

DISCUSSION

Two interrelated themes permeate the categories of *Leadership Opportunities, Responsibility, the Personal and Professional*, and *Fishbowl Effects* that have been already presented. These themes are: *Proximity* and *Transparency* (see Table 1).

Table 1: Proximal-Distal Interpretations through a Contextual Lens.

Core Categories	Contextual Lens	
	Proximal focal length	**Distal focal length**
Leadership Opportunities	Opportunities to view what is involved in leadership roles from colleagues	Support structures are distant
Responsibilities	… for things brought into focus due to being 'up close and personal'	… ultimate responsibility – geographical/emotional distance from friends, family, support structures
The Personal and the Professional	Community gaze at personal and professional lives Difficulty in making distinctions	Personal 'life' remains in another location Professional supports from DET seem distant/isolated/ costly in time/funds/distance
Fishbowl: Life in the Public Gaze	Close up community gaze on personal life and professional decisions	Lack of boundaries between the community and the professional

Proximity refers to the physical and geographical closeness of individuals involved in education. *Transparency*, on the other hand, describes the degree to which individuals are aware of the professional and personal lives of each other. *Proximity* and *Transparency* are closely related since the proximity of individuals to each other means that there are more opportunities for facets of teachers' lives to become transparent.

Proximity (Rural Schools in Context)

Distinguishing features of the rural schools described in this study were their physical proximity to their communities and their geographical isolation. In most small rural towns, the school was a significant focus of community attention; often one of the largest buildings and highly visible. The residence of the teacher was often adjacent to the school buildings and if not occupied by the teacher, the location of that teacher's personal residence was certainly well known to the whole community. There was clearly, however, a distinct lack of proximity for the school to system level resources. For example, district offices were frequently many hours' drive from the schools. Where teachers were conscious of depending on themselves and other colleagues at the same school their responses categorised as *Responsibility* could be understood within this broader theme of *Proximity* as teachers were close to the community but distant from the rest of the school system.

The proximity of school and community, however, also brought with it feelings of connectedness and a necessity to rely on each other by developing both professional and personal networks for support. Ironically, however, this proximity to each other also brought its own problems as "the idea of constant encounter inevitably produces friction" (Sorkin 1999, p. 7).

There were clear benefits for educators where the proximity of schools and communities could be well balanced. Responses categorised as the 'Personal and the Professional' revealed that parents and community members were well aware of the dynamics within the school and that, conversely, staff members are also aware of the social community dynamics. This could be considered both a strength and a challenge for educators in rural schools. On the one hand it meant that schools could respond to the needs of the community and the community could respond to the needs of the school. On the other hand, tensions within the school could be exacerbated by unwelcome input from the community and actions of the school could intrude on community and family sensitivities.

Consciousness of situational isolation expressed as feelings of vulnerability were a feature of some participants' responses. This can also be explained within the broader theme of proximity or, in this case, awareness of distance from support. Many teachers felt new challenges to their capacity to cope due to being often called upon to be fully reliant on their individual skills when they had limited experience to draw upon. Such vulnerability was encountered in generally unsupported and isolated environments (Baills et al. 2002).

Perceptions of support were a critical element for teachers beginning in leadership positions. The theme of *Proximity* was evident in interview responses, categorised as 'Responsibility' and as 'Leadership Opportunities', in which participants described the multiple pressures on teachers who are offered leadership positions. Support from the employer, co-professionals and the community were critical elements in leadership roles but while in rural schools the close proximity of other professionals and the community could be an asset, distance from district offices and other schools meant that system-level supports such as formal and informal mentoring, principal leadership programmes were inconsistent. Although proximity to the community was described as an important element in leadership, this proximity was also seen as a source of difficulty for school leaders who acknowledged the way that their decisions usually attracted rapid feedback, positive and negative.

Transparency (Transparency for Teachers)

Expectations on the teachers and executive staff to maintain a professional image in the community in which they reside were magnified due to the closeness of rural communities. Transparency of all decision making at schools resulted in a level of accountability for educators that few teachers in urban areas may have experienced. Similarly, the personal lives of teachers were also more visible to community members. For many teachers this transparency meant that they were faced with stark choices. Disappearing into the community or fading into the background was not an option in a small community and hence when there was an incompatibility between the individual

and the community, individuals believed that they must choose between conforming to community norms in some way or transferring to another school and community.

A highly visible and transparent context, one in which teachers' personal and professional lives were open to constant scrutiny, was likened to the 'Fishbowl'. Characteristic of the fishbowl is the notion of limited space for potential professional and personal movement. For many teachers there was no demarcation between the two. This had particular impact on beginning teachers and leaders as their early attempts at role identification as professionals were being formulated (Sharplin 2002). This was the point at which new personal perspectives were being deconstructed and reconstructed and hence where there was an internal turmoil or reconfiguration occurring for the individual in most public ways (Bernstein, 2000). For many teachers whose professional experience had been in large urban environments, such additional pressure had not been previously a part of their professional journey.

More prevalent in this paper was the perspective of the teacher looking at the community. The transparency of the 'Fishbowl', however, meant that not only did professionals look at the community, but the community was also watching the professional. Educators in their communities of practice experienced high visibility and accountability in terms of their teaching style, their time at school out of hours, the tidiness of their desks, the social interchanges of teachers-to-teachers and teachers-to-community members with judgements subsequently being made about those interactions (Boylan & McSwann 1998).

Transparency also meant that in isolated contexts potential school leaders saw the work of current leaders in a way that informed their own future professional choices. They saw the work of their school leaders on a day-to-day basis and were thus better informed about the range of roles performed by those leaders. Sometimes this enabled them to see leadership in a positive and desirable light and inspired them to take on leadership roles themselves; because they believed they had something to contribute, because they could see added kudos from the work of the leader, or because they believed that they could do a better job than the current leader. Responses in which participants discussed leadership opportunities also revealed that where the day-to-day working lives of school leaders were transparent, potential leaders sometimes came to evaluate their own capacity to succeed in such positions. It was, however, also clear that some new teachers were deterred from taking on leadership roles precisely because they could see the costs, personally and professionally. In these cases, the transparency of the leader's work was inhibiting for potential leaders who could see the professional, personal and social cost involved in being an executive.

This transparency of the leader's professional life included seeing the external pressures which operated on the school, pressures which sometimes came from the community, but particularly those from the employing authority. These pressures were frequently described in negative terms where 'one size fits all' requirements from the employing authority required small schools to adopt similar reporting and accountability requirements to those of larger schools. These standardised requirements tended to produce proportionately higher workloads for teachers and leaders in small schools than would be experienced in larger ones where economies of scale operated.

In practice, transparency for teachers and school leaders also meant that they were regularly called upon to defend decisions made at a time when the reasons for those decisions and the beliefs that underpinned those decisions were still crystallising. This could also contribute to the reasons that many teachers stay only short periods of time as they "go west, make their mistakes – and move on". This process could also be described as the process of deconstructing and reconstruction notions of teaching and educating as discussed by Bernstein (2000).

CONCLUSION

In addressing the research question, *what opportunities and challenges accompany teachers' early transitions to school leadership roles*, it was clear from the interviews with a variety of teachers that there were many interesting opportunities for formal and informal leadership in rural schools. An enduring image arises, however, of a Principal sitting in an elevated, exposed spot on the top of a pyramid, desperately placing 'bricks of support' into the void beneath to shore up the position of leader in a rural school. This image is potent with regard to early transitions to school leadership because many early career teachers accept these opportunities while they are still developing the attributes that these roles require. *Proximity* to colleagues already in leadership roles informs the decisions of those who choose to take the path of accelerated leadership and those who see the demands of the job "up close" and decide it is not for them.

Support is available in many different forms for teachers who take on leadership responsibilities but often this support is not easily or consistently accessible and must be negotiated in the light of personal and professional issues and the public gaze. The *Transparency* associated with living in a small community can become an issue for some teachers. While the closeness of rural communities facilitates social engagement and the sharing of resources and ideas, in some cases it can make the transition to school leadership more public and more difficult. As Therese (15 years experience, Mentor teacher) summed up her observations at the end of her interview, "Teaching is tough and getting tougher out here. We need more support for the ones that come. Teaching is the only profession that eats its young, you know."

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APPENDIX 1

Name	Experience and Role	Current Location	Previous Experiences
Trisha	5 years experience, teaching Principal	One teacher school with 12 students	Indigenous school
Kerry	Over 10 years' experience , teaching principal	Principal of a one teacher school – 23 students	MEd. Experience in city schools, NESB, casual, central school.
Stuart	13 years' experience, Head Teacher Science	High school in small country town	Head teacher after 6 years of teaching
Tammy	7 years' experience, Assistant Principal.	Small school – (3 teachers) primary school close to regional centre.	3 years as casual and 4 years in remote central school
Leanne	6 years' experience.	Primary school in large regional centre	2.5 years teaching casual secondary, 3.5 years at remote two teacher school
Lucy	4 years' experience	Mid sized school/town 40 mins from regional centre	First appointment
Joan	10 years' experience, Assistant Principal	Primary school in regional city	First appointment in remote town, rapid acceleration to current appointment
Christine	2 years' experience	Primary school in remote town	Planning to leave after 3 years and travel to India.
Therese	15 years' experience, Mentor Teacher	Primary school in remote town	Teaching in same isolated school community for 15 years
Izabel	2.5 years' experience	Primary school in remote town	Is the last of those at current school when she arrived
Josie	6 months' experience	Primary school in rural town	
Thelma	13 years' experience, Principal	Two teacher primary school in small town.	Remote primary schools and city primary school.
Michael	26 years' experience, Principal	School for Specific Purposes (SSP) in large regional centre	Principal of one-teacher school after six years. Has worked as district consultant.