EARLY CAREER LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN AUSTRALIAN RURAL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Due to the difficulties inherent in staffing rural schools in Australia, it is increasingly common for beginning teachers to fill school leadership roles early in their careers. The purpose of this paper is to explore the accelerated progression of some early career teachers who have been offered leadership opportunities in rural schools. Results are drawn from seven semi-structured interviews with early career educators that focused on their experiences of leadership opportunities in rural Australian schools. Quotes from participants illustrate the discussion of the core themes that emerged from the data. Specifically, the themes of Access to Leadership Opportunities and the Nexus of Personal and Professional serve to construct important understandings of the challenges that can accompany teachers' early transition to school leadership roles. By engaging with the challenges presented by rural contexts, it appeared that many of the teachers interviewed in this study were taking a 'fast track' to personal and professional growth, as well as school leadership. This paper describes some of the challenges of early school leadership and provides valuable information to inform staffing decisions and policy matters.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's (HREOC, 2000) national inquiry into rural and remote education concluded that there is a crisis facing rural schools in terms of attracting new teachers. This crisis relates to the preparation, recruitment and retention of rural teachers, particularly in the areas of science, mathematics, and special education teaching (Appleton, 1998; Herrington & Herrington, 2001; White, 2006; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999). Similar situations have been identified in the United States (Bolich, 2001; Brewster & Railsback, 2001) and New Zealand (Lang, 1999).

The aging teaching work force also suggests that a critical shortage of school leaders in rural contexts is looming (Bourke & Lockie, 2001; Preston, 2000; Preston, 2001). As Mulford (2008, p. 66) concludes in his recent Australian Education Review report, school context is vital to consider with the challenges associated with succession planning best left to "local solutions developed by groups of schools taking responsibility for developing talent pools and career paths". While some research has been conducted in the United States concerning the challenges of school leadership in rural schools (e.g., Hammond, Muffs & Sciascia, 2001), there has been little of this kind of research situated specifically in rural New South Wales.

In relation to leadership opportunities and demands, many teachers who work in rural and regional areas are required to provide school or curriculum-based leadership in advance of the usual timeframes. This leadership may take different forms varying from that required to meet the demands of formal executive positions

(e.g., acting as an Assistant Principal) to curriculum coordination and work within professional associations. It may also include providing leadership through filling other school-based roles such as sports coordinator and welfare committee chair.

Exploring the leadership opportunities encountered by new and experienced teachers is part of a broader investigation of rural pedagogies and the challenges associated with teachers locating to rural communities conducted by the Bush Tracks research group based at the University of New England. While the Bush Tracks group of researchers is generally interested in identifying the personal and professional challenges associated with rural teacher transitions, this paper is focussed on documenting early career teachers' experiences in rural school leadership roles. Previous research has identified this transition as problematic for some teachers (see Bush Tracks, 2006; McConaghy, 2006; Miller, Graham & Paterson, 2006).

METHOD

This paper draws together salient findings from dialogues with seven teachers who consented to be interviewed by members of the Bush Tracks research group. As the Bush Tracks research group is based at the University of New England in Armidale, a regional centre in New South Wales, interviews were conducted within a radius of approximately 500 kilometres from this town. Participants were approached after they had signalled their willingness to take part in the research by returning a form included with a previous survey sent to 200 rural teachers in the north-west region of New South Wales.

Researchers arranged with participants a mutually convenient time for them to be interviewed. Travelling to the respondents' school locations provided meaningful contextual data that was useful in constructing an understanding of what it means to teach in particular rural contexts. The teachers interviewed and schools visited were all in small towns with populations of less than 1,000 individuals. Some locations were remote and had high Indigenous populations. A number of the schools visited were included in the Country Area Program (CAP), which is funded by the Australian government and is specifically designed to support geographically isolated schools.

All interviews were conducted by pairs of researchers with one researcher assuming the role of interviewer and the other recording field notes. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and then analysed 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 selective coding, resulted in a small number of core categories, or themes. These themes represented the data in such a way that theoretical saturation was reached and no additional data was found to enrich the core categories (Fassinger, 2005; Glasser, 1992).

To summarise, the findings presented here were gleaned from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with teachers who were in their first seven years of teaching and who identified themselves as filling leadership roles within their

schools. Questions were asked that targeted the school context, teaching and learning, opportunities for school leadership and current challenges faced by the teachers. The questions were open-ended and were followed up by probes that explored the responses more fully.

Seven female teachers were interviewed for this study. Their teaching experience ranged from that of Josie, a teacher for only six months, to that of Tammy and Suzi, who had been teaching for seven years. These teachers' experience of teaching had been almost exclusively in rural schools, although the nature of these schools varied. Leanne and Christine taught in primary schools in large regional centres. Josie and Isabel were teaching in small rural towns and Trisha was the only teacher in a small school of 12 indigenous students. While Tammy was still teaching in the school in which she had begun her teaching career, other teachers had experienced a number of in different schools and a range of permanent and casual appointments.

Figure 1: Teaching experience and leadership positions of interviewees

Psuedonym	Years of Teaching Experience	Leadership position
Josie	6 months	Curriculum Leader
Christine	2 years	Curriculum Coordinator
Isabel	3 years	Sports Coordinator; Union Representative
Trisha	5 years	Teaching Principal
Leanne	6 years	Head Teacher
Suzi	7 years	Assistant Principal
Tammy	7 years	Assistant Principal

In the following section, the results are presented under the thematic headings that emerged from the data. Supporting quotes are included in italics. The purpose of these quotes is to illustrate the analysis of the interviews while reinforcing the individuality and richness of the teachers' voices. Quotes are referenced to the pseudonyms used in this paper, followed by a note indicating the participants' years of teaching experience and the leadership role she currently fills. The themes, *Access to Leadership Opportunities* and the *Nexus of the Personal and Professional,* are the key ideas that frame the research findings presented below.

ACCESS TO LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

In many cases, the teachers interviewed were new to the location and to the profession when they were offered either formal or informal leadership roles. In addition, the generally unstable tenure of the leadership positions of other colleagues affected the professional growth and development of the early career teachers in these rural contexts. Some teachers critically analysed the advantages and disadvantages of taking on leadership roles from closely observing their colleagues' actions.

For all of the teachers interviewed, formal leadership opportunities were offered within accelerated timeframes. For example, Suzi observed that opportunities were plentiful for her career advancement. As she stated:

> *"Well, its just opportunities, where for example my boss said: 'Well, there's a principals' conference on, would you like to come along?' So, I got the chance to go along and go to places like that. So, he often takes us to places like that, so you are getting into the networking of the district and you're getting to see the next level and what goes on and about the politics and the education system, and I quite like it."* (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

Not all teachers, however, chose to take up the opportunities offered by supportive senior colleagues. During her second year as a teacher, Leanne was offered the formal leadership position of Principal at the school where she was teaching. Her reaction was that *"I thought they were joking!"*. She subsequently declined to take up this opportunity because:

> *"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."* (Leanne, 6 years experience, Head Teacher)

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 of formal school leadership.

Another reason cited for not taking up these leadership opportunities was that early career teachers could look ahead and see the personal 'cost' of becoming a school administrator. A second year out teacher, Christine, saw many opportunities and pathways for leadership open to her, but she was also well aware of the demands accompanying those opportunities. *"My deputy . . . says to me sometimes, 'Oh, it's not worth the money!'"* (Christine, 2 years' experience, Curriculum coordinator).

One downside of moving into a formal leadership role described by participants in this study was that, in the vast majority of rural schools, taking on formal leadership responsibilities is in addition to at least some existing classroom responsibilities. Those already in leadership positions acknowledged the tension between the demands of being a classroom teacher and those associated with being a school leader. Christine reported that her supervisor had told her often that, *"she'd like to go back to just being a classroom teacher"*.

Many of the school leaders interviewed, however, described how they had taken up opportunities and made the transition to leadership. Reflecting the need to balance the dual teacher/leader roles Suzi, an Assistant Principal, explained:

> *"I didn't go into teaching to be an administrator. I am a deputy and I have more responsibility, but I am not only an administrator. That's what I basically see of the principal of our school. And I just love teaching, I love being in a classroom with my own children."* (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

Although teachers did not always pursue formal administrative leadership roles, some were called upon to be school-based leaders in their early years of teaching. Suzi, for example, explained that:

"Yes, people are constantly telling me that there are principal jobs at such and such a place, which is half an hour away, but at this point I am not interested. I am now in my 7th year of teaching and third year of assistant principal and I don't think you get those opportunities to become a leader, and become a part of the leadership team at this age in a non-rural area. I think if you want to climb the ladder, get further up in your work, than this is the place to do it." (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

With very little classroom experience, Josie, after six months also discovered that leadership opportunities were plentiful. As she explained, *"because we are under review we all needed to do Key Learning Area programs so I'm it – the leader- the curriculum coordinator for HSIE!"* (Josie, 6 months' experience, Curriculum Leader).

Whether the leadership role was considered formal or informal, however, participants in this study reported that a particular challenge for inexperienced leaders was the instability of staffing in many rural and remote schools. One teacher, Izabel, noted that, *"This is my third year here and there is not one teacher or executive still on staff that was here when I arrived"*. (Izabel, 3 years' experience, Sports Coordinator and Union representative)

Suzi commented at length about the difficulties that she encountered with staff turnover in her job as Assistant Principal:

"I have been here longer than my boss, he's my second boss, since I have been here. For me it's the transience of the people, the people that come and go that challenge. I am open for new things all the time and being here for 7 years I am the second longest teacher here, and I find that extremely frustrating. ... Whenever we try something new, just the retraining of new teachers that come every year is very, very frustrating. ... I think that's so much less work for other schools, where everyone just knows what to do. ... That's just the biggest challenge I think for me. I don't know, it's just that reteaching every year. And as I was telling you, one of the other things that we're doing at the moment is a two-year program, but in two years are we going to have any of the teachers who have started this program? I mean, I will be here, but the three teachers in year 4 at the moment, won't be here in two years time." (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

An implication of this is that teachers new to leadership positions face particular challenges in rural schools when trying to establish mentoring relationships and communicate professionally with colleagues. As Suzi recalls:

"I had trouble at first, I think because I was young in my position as AP, you know, to communicate and give instructions or what not ... It's becoming easier, but I still find it challenging. I'm working at my skills constantly. How I am saying things? Is the tone I'm using right? How can I communicate more effectively? And how do I do everything without people getting offside and all working as a team?" (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

Teachers considering moving into leadership positions were sensitive to this instability and the demands on them as young leaders. Often they looked to their Principals for mentoring. Leanne, for example, described her experiences and the effects these had on her development as a school leader. She described the three

principals she worked with over the three and a half years she taught at a remote school during her interview:

> "The first one, he was fantastic, probably one of the nicest principals in the district. ... He was very organised, very supportive, would really value my input of what money to spend in what area. We did a lot of resourcing. When I came, there weren't enough copies and things like that. I was able to set that up.' (Leanne, 6 years' experience, Head Teacher.)

Leanne's collegial experience was replaced by a less positive one, however, when a casual teacher was appointed as Acting Principal.

> "He wasn't someone who was in it for the love of the job. He'd come to school late and 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. 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, Head Teacher).

While some teachers took up opportunities as they arose, even though they may have doubted their capacity to take on those roles, other teachers articulated a need to follow a more measured approach to leadership, by first fully experiencing the career of classroom teacher for which they had been trained. Christine, a teacher of two year's experience, explained that while there has been encouragement from her supervisors to consider formal leadership roles, *"At the moment I'm just happy to work on fine tuning my skills - I'm enjoying being a class teacher, I don't want to be a deputy 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 and went on to acknowledge that in her case, *"I'll move when I'm ready and there's always the hope that I might be a principal one day."*

Transitions into leadership roles, however, can segregate teachers from colleagues and place leaders in positions that precipitate conflict between family and professional roles. An exploration of these issues as they emerged from the interviews is presented in the next section.

NEXUS OF PERSONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

The interview data revealed the frequently problematic interface between the personal or family and professional lives of the participants. The teachers interviewed articulated a need to keep some distance between these two aspects of their lives while recognising that in smaller rural communities such distances were difficult to maintain. For example, some of the participants in this study were employed as Teaching Principals and were often the only educational professional in an isolated community. Teachers in this situation explained that being so isolated both personally and professionally elicited feelings of vulnerability and of high accountability. The concern about being totally accountable was voiced by Leanne who, remembering her time at a remote rural school, recalled that:

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

Having assumed a leadership role in a school, participants reported that they encountered considerable challenges and on-going struggles to develop and maintain support networks to ameliorate their sense of vulnerability and fear. These feelings were particularly powerful for the teachers in leadership roles. However, it is not only affecting the experienced teachers. Suzi spoke of the interest and attention all new teachers are afforded in small towns. She said that:

"I know at times that I have been talked about, but then, who hasn't? ... I've heard things about myself that I think, 'Wow! I never knew I could do that!' ... But then, I don't know anybody that hasn't been talked about in a small town. There's always rumours flying around about somebody about ... and I think if you do nothing, they just make them up. It doesn't worry me now." (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

Suzi also identified a specific issue experienced by teachers who are parents in rural communities when she considered how long she would stay in a rural area when faced with choices abut the education of her children:

"I think I would want my children to go to my school because I went to a public primary school, but went to a private high school. I would want them to have the best schooling they could. I am a huge supporter of public education ... but it would be a very difficult decision." (Suzi, 7 years experience, Assistant Principal)

In this instance, a teacher's decisions about the education of her own children is likely to be complicated by her position as a school leader and advocate for public education. A distinction between family and professional lives remains difficult to attain for many teachers in small communities.

The closeness of the school community to teachers and school leaders 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 their involvement in community activities.

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. Josie, a teacher for just six months, illustrated this difficulty as she explained that *"when my boyfriend travels to visit – he is not to be seen staying at my place – the parents will talk"*.

As Tammy, an Assistant Principal with seven years' experience said, *"Sometimes I think it is the community that stops people staying. The community and expectations can make it really hard for you."* Trisha, a principal with five year's experience, also 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. Many participants related incidents that underscored the point that Tammy made in her interview when she said, *"Simply living in a community is not the same as being a part of that community."* (7 years' experience, Assistant Principal).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, many of the teachers interviewed in this research 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. This was true of teachers in their first year who were already being asked to consider leadership roles and teachers in their subsequent years of teaching who were beginning to see the downside of such opportunities. A feature of being presented with fast-track opportunities in rural schools seemed to be a considerable awareness of what was associated with those opportunities. Teachers in these small rural schools were, as a consequence of their familiarity with the day-to-day operation of the school, able to see both the advantages and disadvantages of taking up leadership opportunities. Taking on a formal leadership role such as Assistant Principal, for example, might bring added satisfaction and variety, but it might also mean increased challenges and reduced focus on classroom teaching.

These interviews with early career teachers encouraged discussion of the advantages or disadvantages of leadership roles in the context of the participants 'becoming' both teachers and leaders (Deleuze & Guattari, 1995) while also being at a personal level an individual, a parent and, in some cases, a partner. From these interviews it was clear that the rural context itself was significant. Teachers described their own professional growth and change occurring in the full view of the broader community and emphasised the added pressure that this public scrutiny brought with it. While often being defined by their teaching role, early career teachers were challenged to also develop a sense of personal identity apart from that role.

Halsey (2006) suggests that teachers living and working in small rural and remote places benefit from constructing a spatial map (see Soja, 1996) that integrates personal, professional and public domains and can assist them in framing, monitoring and managing interactions "so that there can be said to be 'always room to move'" (p. 497) to ensure that teachers retain the capacities needed to be effective facilitators of student learning. Maintaining multiple identities in small communities can create particular challenges. Exploring the implications of this community visibility for the professional and personal 'becoming' of early career teachers in rural contexts is an area of future research interest for the Bush Tracks research group.

Certainly, the journeys of early career teachers from family and familiarity

into rural schools are rich with change and opportunity. Such change and opportunity can be viewed in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's (1995) notion of 'rhizomatic' becoming where ruptures create opportunities for growth and new connections. As one of the participants reflected:

> *"I like the challenges and I like the rewards. I always wanted to teach in a western area. I liked the idea of going to a rural western area and that's why I was prepared to go anywhere ... I think it's just the challenges and the rewards. I like the sense of small community and knowing the parents, and knowing the kids in that small community. It's a family sort of situation. I really like that. I suppose that's not for everybody, but for me that's part of what I enjoy."* (Suzi, 7 years' experience, Assistant Principal)

Considered from this perspective, teaching in rural schools - taking the 'bush track' - can be seen as taking a 'fast track' to both professional and personal growth. Professional opportunities for early career teachers are abundant in rural schools for a variety of reasons. Making choices to embrace, decline or postpone those opportunities reflects a deepening of professional skill alongside personal maturity. Development of a distinctly personal identity can be challenging in rural contexts but it seems that many of the teachers interviewed in this study were taking a fast track to personal growth and career development.

Emerging from this research is the need for school systems to acknowledge the personal and professional implications for teachers accepting leadership roles before the 'usual timeframe'. As part of the process, the provision of professional development, which could support leaders in schools within rural contexts, would be mutually advantageous. In addition, the preserve teacher education programs of study can incorporate the findings of this research to inform and prepare students to the issues, opportunities and implications of teaching in rural contexts. Finally, postgraduate coursework in education is ideally suited to support teachers as they build their skills and experience leadership in tandem with focused school leadership study.

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