

Leadership in Australian Rural Schools: Bush Track, Fast Track

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Abstract

Due to the difficulties inherent in staffing rural schools it is increasingly common for beginning teachers to fill school leadership roles early in their careers. The accelerated progression of some teachers impacts on the overall nature of leadership in rural schools and creates unique pathways, generally different from those available to teachers who work in large urban centres, that fast-track individuals from student teacher to beginning teacher to school leader. This paper draws on interviews with eight early career educators to focus on their experiences of leadership in rural schools. Quotes from participants illustrate our discussion of the core categories that emerged from the data. Specifically, the themes of Access to Leadership Opportunities and the Nexus of Personal and Professional serve to construct an understanding of the challenges that accompany teachers' early transition to school leadership roles.

INTRODUCTION

There is a crisis in rural school staffing in Australia. 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; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater 1999; Herrington and Herrington 2001), and to a further exacerbation of the anticipated shortage of rural school leaders in the near future. Similar crises have been identified in the United States (Bolich 2001; Brewster & Railsback 2001) and New Zealand (Lang 1999).

An aging teaching work force suggests that there will be a critical shortage of both classroom teachers and school leaders in five to ten years (Bourke & Lockie 2001; Preston, 2000; 2001). Thus, the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education and Training has begun to develop succession plans and leadership development strategies for use in rural school districts (McClellan 2002). While some research has been conducted in the USA concerning the school leadership crisis (Hammond 2001), there has been a paucity of this kind of research situated specifically in the NSW context of rural schooling.

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 usual timeframes. This leadership may take different forms - 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 (e.g., stage coordinator of Key Learning Area programming, or office holder in the local branch of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association.) - as well as providing leadership through other school based roles such as sports coordinator, and welfare committee chair.

METHOD

This paper is focused on the issue of accelerated leadership for teachers in schools in rural and remote locations. Accelerated leadership for new and experienced teachers is part of the broader Bush Tracks investigation of rural pedagogies, the challenges associated with teachers locating to rural communities, and the particular issues that arise on rural teaching contexts for early career educators. While the Bush Tracks

research team generally seeks to identify the personal and professional challenges associated with rural teacher transitions, this paper is focussed on documenting early career teachers' experiences of their transitions to rural school leadership roles. Previous research, including that already conducted by members of the Bush Tracks team, has identified this transition as problematic (reference our ERA paper here as well as another from the BT group).

This paper draws together salient findings from case studies of eight teachers who consented to be interviewed by members of the Bush Tracks research project. Members of the Bush Tracks research team arranged with participants a time and location to be interviewed. Travelling to the respondents' locations provided meaningful contextual data that was useful to the researchers in constructing an understanding of what it means to teach in rural schools. As the Bush Tracks research group is based in Armidale, New South Wales, interviews were conducted within a radius of approximately 500 kilometres from the regional University of New England. The teachers interviewed and schools visited were in small towns with populations of <1,000 individuals that included some locations considered to be remote which had high Indigenous populations. A number of the schools visited were included in the federally funded Country Area Program (CAP) that is specifically designed to support remote schools.

The findings presented here were gleaned from in-depth interviews with teachers who were in their first seven years of teaching experience and who were identified as filling leadership roles within their schools. The profiles of the eight female individuals interviewed for this study are presented in the descriptive paragraphs below.

Table 1. Profile of teachers indicating their years of teaching experience and their accelerated leadership positions

Name	Experience, role	Current location	Previous experiences
Trisha	5 years experience, teaching principal	One teacher school with 12 students	Indigenous school
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
Josie	6 months experience	Primary school in	

		rural town	
Christine	2 years experience	Primary school in regional city	Planning to leave after 3 years and travel to India
Izabel	2.5 years experience	Primary school in rural town	Is the last of those who were teaching at her current school when she arrived
Suzi	7 years experience	Primary school in small rural town	Assistant Principal for the last 3.5 years

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants. Audio recordings and field notes based on these interviews were transcribed and then analysed for thematic responses (Cohen & Manion 1989). Pairs of researchers carried out the interviews with one taking the role of interviewer and the other recording field notes. Questions were presented for discussion that targeted the school context, teaching challenges, 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.

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 findings of the interviews while reinforcing the individuality and richness of the teachers' voices. Quotes are referenced to the pseudonyms already used in this paper, followed by numerals denoting the participants' years of teaching experience and the leadership role(s) 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.

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 in action.

For all of the teachers interviewed, formal leadership opportunities were offered within accelerated timeframes. For example, Suzi (7 years experience, Assistant Principal) 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 change 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, choose to take up the opportunities that are provided by supportive senior colleagues. Leanne in only her second year as a teacher 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 for formal leadership.

Another reason cited for not taking up these leadership opportunities was that early career teachers 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 ‘cost’ of those opportunities. *“My deputy . . . says to me sometimes, ‘oh, it’s not worth the money!’”*

One downside of moving into a formal leadership role that was described by participants in this study was that in the vast majority of rural schools, taking on formal leadership responsibilities is in addition to 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 with more than three years of leadership experience 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.”*

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.”

With very little classroom experience, Josie, after six months discovered that *“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!”*

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, years and position)

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, 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 (Assistant Principal), 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, or the tone I’m using or how can I communicate more effectively. And do everything without people getting offside and all working as a team”. (Suzi, 7 years, 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.)

When a casual teacher was appointed as Acting Principal, this positive experience, however, was replaced by a less positive one.

“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).

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 will be presented in the next section.

THE NEXUS OF PERSONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

Another theme that emerged from the interview data related to 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.

Many of the participants in this study were in small schools, with some employed as Teaching Principals, who were often the only professional in a very isolated community. Teachers in this situation explained that being so isolated both personally and professionally elicited feelings of vulnerability and of high accountability. This 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).

Having assumed a leadership role in a school, participants reported that there were considerable challenges and on-going struggles to develop and maintain support networks, struggles that themselves created a sense of vulnerability and fear.

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

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.

In summary, many of the teachers we interviewed were discussing the issues of relevance, balance of work and family, outside pressures of the community, and the continual responses to new Department policies and directives. This was true of teachers in their first year who are already placed as curriculum coordinators, or teachers in their second year teaching who are beginning to see the downside of leadership roles. Sports organisers, executive position offers of Deputy Principalships and Principalships were all mentioned as early career teachers and others with wide-ranging experience.

DO WE STOP HERE?

WRAP UP WITH A DISCUSSION.

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