Theorizing Cultural (Mis)recognition in Rural School Staffing: Implementing a Social Justice Frame to Understand Challenges to Attract Rural Teachers

Hernan Cuervo
University of Melbourne, hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au

Theorizing Cultural (Mis)recognition in Rural School Staffing: Implementing a Social Justice Frame to Understand Challenges to Attract Rural Teachers

Theorizing Cultural (Mis)recognition in Rural School Staffing: Implementing a Social Justice Frame to Understand Challenges to Attract Rural Teachers

Hernan Cuervo

Attracting teachers to rural schools continues to be a problem in Australian education. Debates on how to remedy staff shortages are based on a better distribution of financial and material resources. This emphasis on distribution has sidelined the role of recognition theory in understanding the challenges of rural staffing. I draw on the social justice frameworks of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth to argue that rural staffing challenges are anchored not just on matters of distribution but on issues that lead to the cultural misrecognition and disrespect of teaching and learning in rural places. Using data from a qualitative research project with pre-service teachers from a metropolitan university who undertook a six-week placement in a rural school, I explore how Fraser's and Honneth's frameworks contribute to illuminate that a resignification of the cultural value of rural education is critical to understand the root of the problem of rural school staffing.

The attraction and retention of teachers in rural schools is a significant issue faced by rural education around the world (Azano et al., 2019; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). In Australia, the latest policy document on the attraction and retention of teachers in rural schools reports that staffing remains an ongoing challenge (Department of Education & Training (DET), 2021). This policy places the emphasis on financial and material incentives to solve this challenge. This emphasis on incentives for teachers to work in rural schools is just one of the several policy efforts in the last two decades to map a solution to an entrenched problem (see Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 2000; Halsey, 2018). That is, historically Australian education policies have focused on extrinsic factors, such as providing financial and material incentives to attract teachers to rural schools. For example, examining policies across all states and territories in Australia (i.e. the governments responsible for public schooling), Roberts and Downes (2020) affirmed that financial incentives outstrip other forms of incentives to attract new and experienced teachers. Other forms of material incentives offered by governments to teachers willing to go rural are faster job promotion opportunities, extra work leave, professional development, mentoring opportunities, subsidies for accommodation and travel costs, among others (see Roberts & Downes, 2020, for a comprehensive analysis of government incentives).

In this article I argue that the problem of attracting teachers to rural schools is not just a matter of a better distribution of material and financial incentives but that it is also an issue of recognition of the cultural status of rural education. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's and Axel Honneth's conceptualizations of theory of justice, I contend that problems of rural staffing that are solely conceived as a matter of distribution of resources are also based on a cultural misrecognition and disrespect of what it entails to teach and work in rural schools. I draw on data from a qualitative research project with eight pre-service teachers from a metropolitan university who undertook a six-week placement in a rural school in a community located three hours away from the major metropolitan centre. Participants in this study were interviewed before, during and after the placement (N= 24 interviews) to explore the motivations for taking a rural placement, their experience of it, and the factors that influenced their decisions for taking, or not, a rural teaching job after finishing their teacher education degree.

Focusing on pre-service teachers' experiences, I explore how Fraser's (1997; 2003) "perspectival dualism" of justice and Honneth's (1995; 2003) "normative monism" framework help elucidates that a resignification of the cultural and moral value of rural education is essential to understand the root of the problem of rural school staffing. While both approaches are developed later in the article, it is important to establish here that Fraser believes that remedies to injustices and inequalities might often require both distribution (economic justice) and recognition (cultural justice) – for example, better allocation of school resources (including staffing)

and the adequate institutional cultural value given to social groups (such as rural communities). While Honneth recognizes that material resources and cultural resignification are important aspects to redress injustices, he believes that recognition, including providing social respect to all individuals and social groups, precedes distributive measures and forms the core of justice. For Honneth, inequities of distributive matter might be experienced by social groups because of their misrecognition in society or by social institutions. Ultimately, contrasting Fraser's and Honneth's frameworks and drawing on pre-service teachers' experiences of rural placements enables the possibility to illustrate and analyze some of the causes behind the perennial challenge to properly staffing rural schools.

Before continuing with the analysis of Fraser's and Honneth's approaches to theory of justice, I provide with a brief analysis of policy efforts to redress the problem of rural staffing shortage in Australia. This includes interrogating the usefulness of these policies by illuminating their blind-spots in regard to issues of recognition of rural teaching. Then, I sketch Fraser's and Honneth's social justice frameworks to introduce a theory of recognition to rural education, a policy and praxis field usually dominated by the distributive dimension of justice. In this section, I explain how Fraser's (2003) "perspectival dualism" and Honneth's (2003) "normative monism" can elucidate the relevance of recognition theory to the problem of rural staffing. The article follows with the explanation of the project and its research methods, followed by pre-service teachers' experiences of rural teaching, including their reasons to undertake a rural placement and their view of teaching and living in a rural community. These experiences are analyzed under the lenses of Fraser's and Honneth's frameworks, which reveal that beyond distributive matters, the problem of rural staffing seems to be anchored on a misrecognition of the significance of rural education and knowledges. This misrecognition is, inadvertently, produced by individuals but also by social institutions and policies. The article concludes with some remarks about the relevance of recognition theory for the resignification of rural education.

An Analysis of Policy Approaches to the Problem of Rural Staffing

In Australia, the challenge to attract teachers to rural schools has been recognized as a problem since at least the early 1900s (DET, 2021). In modern education policy, rural staffing has occupied a prominent place as one of the key factors explaining inequities between rural and urban students'

educational outcomes (see Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1975; HREOC, 2000). Early in the first modern policy document dedicated in its entirety to rural schooling, "Schooling in Rural Australia" (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988), it was noted that attracting teachers to rural and isolated schools was one of the main obstacles to a good quality of education (p. 1). The policy report identified as one of the important factors contributing to this persistent challenge of staffing, the "little emphasis placed on the preparation of teachers for work in rural schools in most Australian teacher education courses" (p. 145). It was also noted that many of the new teachers in rural and remote schools were from an urban background and were "ill-equipped to face the realities of living and working in rural and remote areas" (p. 141).

These challenges identified more than three decades ago persist today in the new century. For instance, federal and state government policies and documents claim that every child in Australia should be entitled to benefit from the same high quality school education. They affirm that schooling outcomes should be free from differences arising from student's socioeconomic background or geographic location (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007; DET, 2003, 2005). The latest rural education policy reports (see Halsey 2018; DET, 2021) advocate for several financial, labor and material incentives to be distributed to those teachers prepared to live and work in rural and remote areas. Solutions to the rural staffing shortage have included better income reward, monetary support for accommodation, cost of travel and professional development courses; as well as labor incentives such as study leave and extended work leave, "fast-track" pathways for job promotion and the opportunity to move back to a metropolitan school of choice after a "period of rural service" (Roberts & Downes, 2020, p. 12; see also Cuervo et al., 2019; White, 2019). The latest review on rural and remote incentives in the state of New South Wales argues for a "system [that] provides teachers with incentives to work at harder-to-staff schools by providing them with an 'exit strategy' to relocate to a preferred school" (DET 2021, 7).

It is clear from many of the policies in the last few decades that they favor a distributive approach to solve this perennial challenge through the redistribution of resources and benefits for new rural teachers and for schools. However, the underlying discourse in the "exit strategy" addressed in the DET (2021) policy review, as well as in many other Australian states and territories education policies, is a deficit view of rural teaching and living. Roberts and Downes (2020, p. 7) in their exhaustive review of

incentives persuasively argue that incentives work to affirm a "focus on disadvantage, rather than valuing the rural teaching profession". Incentive policies, such as "exit strategy", can work to reaffirm to new graduates from urban backgrounds a "lack of commitment to staying long term", as well the perceptions that working and living away from the city is "too hard" or for a "short period of time" (p. 7). According to White (2019, p. 143) a long-term problem with incentive is "that they do very little to transform the preparation and education of pre-service teachers to better work *in* and *for* rural schools and their communities" (emphasis in original) but rather mostly focus on establishing extrinsic factors to motivate, particularly urban, teachers to take a rural placement.

As mentioned above, more than three decades ago, the policy report "Schooling in Rural Australia (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988) identified a deep lack of engagement with rural education preparation in university teacher education programs across the country. It identified a need to better resource the teaching and learning of rural education in teacher education programs. The report asserted that many of these programs lack any rural education subjects, units or content in their courses – a systematic deficit that has been recorded by subsequent policy reports (see HREOC, 2000; Halsey, 2018). One of the problems of this lack of knowledge and content on rural education is that it tends to lead to the construction of deficit discourses about teaching outside the metropolis. Sharplin (2002, p. 50) identifies in the literature negative perceptions of rural teaching in the early 1950s that equate the rural teaching post with "a dead end job", a "forced exile", and one capable of "breaking" teachers (see Richmond, 1953). In her own research, Sharplin found that pre-service teachers' views of living and working in rural areas before their placement experience resonated with those from the early literature. Her participants resorted to "romanticized images of rural Australia such as "friendly locals" and "warm community", which were conflated with expectations of "difficulty", "loneliness", "isolation' and lack of school resources (e.g. mentors, professional development) (Sharplin, 2002, p. 56). For Sharplin, pre-service teachers were "under-informed" and relying on "narrow stereotypes of rural and remote teaching" (p. 60).

Rural Education as a Matter of Recognition

It is evident from education policies that the favored approach to redress the problems of rural staffing is a better distribution of financial, material and labor resources and incentives to attract teachers to live and work in non-metropolitan places. In other words, a distributive approach is believed to yield the best results to appropriately staff rural schools. This is perhaps unsurprising given the prominence of a politics of distribution to solve entrenched policy problems and redress inequalities in Australian social life (e.g., in education and health). In education, a better distribution of resources, including re-designing school funding formulas to support disadvantaged schools (see Gonski Review on school funding – Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2011), is generally applied with the aim of creating a level playing field between "rich" and "poor" schools, which ultimately will make "fair" the educational outcomes of different schools and students. In Australian education policy, a Rawlsian politics of distribution (e.g. the proper allocation of resources for those least advantage in society) has been applied with the Gonski Review which aimed to fund more appropriately schools that have a greater proportion of students from low socioeconomic background with the ultimate goal of generating fairness withing education. In a similar vein, the reallocation of funds to attract teachers in hard to staff schools, like many rural and remote schools (see DET, 2021; Halsey, 2018) also follows Rawls's principle that unequal distribution of resources can only be acceptable when it favors those most in need (Rawls, 1972). In this case, rural and remote schools are positioned as disadvantaged and needing a distribution of resources to, for example, be properly staffed.

In the last three decades, political philosophers have expanded the idea of justice from distribution to recognition (see Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 1995; Young, 1990). The goal in this case is to shift the analysis of inequality from solely redistribution of financial and material resources to a focus on the recognition, respect and legitimization of the cultures and ways of being of all individuals and social groups. To put it simply, a theory of recognition proposes that, to redress injustices, it is critical to pull apart entrenched institutionalized hierarchies that allocate different cultural value to different individuals according to their social background and identity, their values and ways of being (Fraser, 1997). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to distill the different approaches to recognition by political philosophers like Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, a politics of recognition fundamentally proposes a reciprocal relation between different individuals and social groups. Theories of recognition argue that "nonrecognition or misrecognition… can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted reduced mode of being", to such an extent that "due

recognition is not just a courtesy but a vital human need" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). At risk of simplifying her vast oeuvre on this matter, Fraser (2003, p. 29) argues that when institutionalized patterns of cultural value establish some individuals or groups as "inferior", "excluded" or "simply invisible", "hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we would speak of *misrecognition* and status *subordination*" (emphasis on original). This cultural devaluation and stigmatization prevent some individuals and social groups to participate as equals in everyday life.

In Fraser's (1997; 2003) conceptual apparatus, both redistribution and recognition might be necessary to redress injustices. This is what she terms a "perspectival dualism" of justice, in which individuals or social groups experiencing injustice might need both a proper allocation of material and financial resources and equal respect of the social and cultural status against other cultural and social norms. That is, for Fraser, remedies to injustices might sometimes need economic justice (distribution) and other times cultural justice (recognition) and in other circumstances both redistribution and recognition.

While the extent of the debate between Fraser and Honneth exceeds the scope of this paper, it is important to state that Honneth disagrees with the idea of "persepectival dualism" of justice and argues that even matters that are of economic injustice need to be understand as an "institutional expression of social disrespect"; that is, "of unjustified relations of recognition" (Honneth, 2003, p. 114). Arguing for a "normative monism", Honneth disagrees with Fraser because he sees recognition as the main moral category and distribution merely as a subvariety of the struggle for recognition. For example, thinking about movements of emancipation by women and African Americans in the last two centuries in the United States, Honneth (2003, p. 135) argues that while their claims were around issues of economic and cultural justice, fundamentally "their protests were tailored to registering social humiliation and disrespect". Further, while we might not know how certain individuals "saw themselves disrespected or not recognized", nonetheless according to Honneth the evidence "shows unmistakably that injustice is regularly associated with withheld recognition". While I will return later in the article to both theorists' work, of importance for this study is that both frameworks of justice developed by Fraser and Honneth enable us to explore the roots of the rural staffing problem. That is, they help us examine whether the perennial shortage of staffing responds to a matter of poor distribution of financial and material resources to attract teachers to live and work in rural communities; or if it responds to a cultural de-valuation of rural knowledge and ways of beings by institutions and individuals.

Research Study

This article is based on a qualitative research study that investigated the role that rural teaching placement played in motivating pre-service teachers to take up a rural secondary school job. Eight pre-service teachers, six females and two males, were interviewed before, during and after the placement (N= 24 interviews) to examine the reasons for taking a rural placement, their experience working and living in a rural community for six weeks, and the factors shaping their decision to pursue, or not, a rural teaching post. Participants were recruited trough a multimodal approach. Although the sample size is small, this is in part due to the nature of the research and due to the fact that few pre-service teachers in the university are willing to undertake rural placements. I do not intend to make any generalizations about the factors and barriers to attract new teachers to rural schools but rather to utilize frameworks of theory of justice to elucidate potential causes for the root of the rural staffing shortages.

In the first instance, the project was introduced to seventy-two pre-service teachers from a major metropolitan university who were attending an introductory session to rural teaching (led by two rural school principals). A flyer explaining the research project and encouraging participation was distributed to all attendees. Twenty-eight participants showed interest in learning more about the project and in taking part in the three stage-process interviews. Of this group, eight pre-service teachers, aged between twenty-three and thirty years old, agreed and took part in the interviews before, during and after the placement.

In this metropolitan university, pre-service teachers have the opportunity, if they wish to, to undertake a six-week placement in a rural school. Pre-service teachers undertake two rounds of placement which are designed to provide praxis to pre-service teachers in the art and profession of teaching. In their placements, they are paired with a mentor, who is a current teacher in the school, who supports and advises the pre-service teacher during the six-week tenure. The eight participants taking part in this research undertook their first placement in urban schools and their second one in rural schools in the state of Victoria. This research study focuses on the rural placements; however, participants often drew from their urban experience and used it as the standard against which to compare their rural experience. It is important to note that participants

took a rural teaching placement with their best intentions to explore an aspect of their profession that they felt interesting and one for which they felt not so well prepared. However, their view of the urban experience as the norm, as it is illustrated below, influenced their rural experience.

All the participants in this research did their rural placement in a school located in a community three hours away from the major metropolitan center and in a town of around four thousand people. The host community has a history of farming; although it recently developed a significant tourism industry due to their proximity to ski resorts (ABS, 2012). The secondary school has a population of approximately four hundred and fifty students, including fifty full-time staff, and it draws its student population mostly from families from a low-socioeconomic background (Myschool website, 2018). In this school, at least half of the student population belongs to the bottom quarter of the socioeconomic status distribution (Myschool website, 2018). During the placement, participants shared a house that is facilitated by the school and university.

All interviews in the three rounds (pre, during and post placement) lasted approximately one hour. They were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later professionally transcribed. In the first round of interviews, before the placement, questions to participants revolved around their personal and professional background, their reasons to undertake a teacher education degree, the factors motivating them to seek a rural pre-service placement and the likelihood that they will consider a job in a rural school after graduating. In the second round of interviews, during the placement, questions for participants revolved around their experience of working and living in a rural community. These included their classroom and school experience, and their relationship with their mentor, other school staff, students, and parents. Questions also focused on their experience of living in a rural environment and their interaction with the broader community. As in every interview round, participants were also asked to rank from one to ten (one very unlikely, ten very likely) their likelihood of a seeking rural teaching post after graduation. In the final round of interviews, a few months after the placement, participants were asked questions destined to revisit and rethink their placement experience, both in terms of working and living in a rural community, and to rank the likelihood they might take up a rural teaching job.

Interviews were recorded, with participants' consent, and entered into the NVivo qualitative software program. Data was coded firstly based on each interview question topics (i.e. a priori themes).

By this I mean grouping responses from all participants to each question topic together. Here NVivo enables the researcher to make sure coding remains close to the data, rather than immediately creating abstract concepts, by having organized and quick access to the responses of participants to a specific question or topic (Welsh, 2002).

While obviously the software package does not analyze the data for the researcher, it "can be helpful in terms of counting "who said what" within a theme" (Welsh, 2002, p. 6). For example, in the second round of interviews, during the rural teaching placement, all participants were asked: "What are the things that you enjoy most about teaching in a rural school?" Five out of eight participants mentioned "positive relationships" in this question topic, such as feeling close to students, their relationship with other staff or their mentors, or "getting to know students". Seven out of eight of these participants also mentioned the community: for its "closeness" or "atmosphere" being "terrific"; for being "friendly" and "caring"; or the "community's sort of slowed down, you're not rushing to everywhere, all the time." (In the next question on what they "least enjoy", participants talked about issues of "isolation", and "fishbowl experiences" in the community.) In this instance of the whole coding process, NVivo allowed me to easily group, count (repetition of particular words and meanings) and retrieve segments of the interview transcript. It also "adds rigour to the analysis process" by allowing the researcher to conduct "accurate searches of a particular type" (Welsh, 2002, p.5).

The grouping of participants' responses to each question topic enabled a better reading of the interview text and provided the possibility of highlighting key parts of it and the ascription of codes to these text parts in a successive way. Code memos written using the software package were also associated with the relevant code and piece of data. Further, this open coding allowed for an "interpretive process" by which data could be "broken down analytically" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 13). Through this open coding, experiences, feelings, events, actions and interactions were compared against one another for differences and similarities, and conceptually labelled; to which similar ones later generate categories and subcategories (e.g. community isolation, close-knit community, classroom ready). As Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 13) argue, "fracturing the data forces the examination of preconceived notions and ideas by judging these against data themselves".
Furthermore, the codes and categories that emanate from the experiences and actions of the research participants in their rural placement posts can be

contrasted with previous research on this theme and put under the microscope of a general theory (e.g. theory of recognition) but can also generate exciting new conceptual and empirical routes in the topic. (For example, reviewing the data in relationship to "a priori themes" brought up issues and ideas, new codes, that were not directly linked to my interview questions, such as notion of pre-service teachers utilizing the rural placement as a "training" space and time for their future teaching careers.) Finally, it is important to state that follow-up emails with all participants took place eight and twelve months after the final interview to check if they changed their previous decision to seek, or not, a rural teaching post (participants decisions remained constant through the three interview rounds).

Findings

In their teacher education program, pre-service teachers interested in a rural placement were offered a few seminars to introduce them to teaching outside the metropolis. All participants in this study agreed that there could have been more rural content in their teacher education degree. (In this teacher education degree there is no compulsory or elective rural education subjects. Introduction to rural education is at the discretion of lecturers rather than institutionalized through specific subjects – as it is with other social issues such as gender or race.) Some participants like Sophie believed that she could have benefited from more "debates about what rural placement is compared to metropolitan placement". Others, like Caroline, "felt prepared on the teaching aspect of it, but in terms of living rurally and just general social things, probably it was a bit daunting, like I wasn't sure of what I was getting myself into". Finally, Melissa stated in her pre-placement interview that "in first semester when you learn about policy issues and things and they seem to be mostly metropolitan focused, I think maybe you could do a class on issues facing rural schools perhaps." Overall, students felt "classroom-ready" but not "community- ready" (White & Kline, 2012). Like other pre-service teachers, Veronica enjoyed the few seminars on rural teaching but found the most useful information through other channels: "I already knew about the rural placement because I had a couple of friends who did it last year". Indeed, against a lack of abundant content of rural education in their degree, six out of eight of the participants commented that they turned to their peers and classmates as key informants on what to expect when going rural.

During and after the placement rounds of interviews, pre-service teachers reported positive experiences in their rural placements. These were mostly based on interpersonal relationships, in which participants felt that teachers, students, parents and the broader community were supportive and welcoming of them. Participants tended to define the rural community and school members as "friendly", "supportive", "caring", and they valued the close relationship between students and teachers. However, this strong sense of close-knit community was also juxtaposed with feelings of "isolation", being constantly "in and out of the school in the gaze of teachers and students", and "being further away of resources" and "amenities" (i.e. places to shop, cultural activities). This tension is not uncommon in novice teachers doing their first experience in a rural setting. Sharplin (2002; 2009) noted pre-service teachers' "romanticized images of rural Australia" were "interspersed with expectations of "difficulty", "loneliness" and "isolation"; thus, sharply revealing a tension between their "hopes and fears" (Sharplin 2002, p. 4).

One participant, Oscar, made the following comment during his rural placement:

I think the community atmosphere is terrific. I think people in general and the kids are very happy to just talk and are open and share things with you. There's greater communication which I really like. I think sometimes in the city schools, people and teachers are rushing around.

Embedded in this quote is a perception of rural spaces as communities of mutuality, of greater interpersonal care and respect. However, Oscar also believed that this idyllic rural schooling atmosphere is supported by a supposedly "slower" pace of work and life than what he experienced in his urban placement. Upon further reflecting on his experience teaching in a rural school, Oscar felt that one of the main differences with his previous experience in an urban school placement was that rural students presented "more complex issues with behavior management." Further, he commented:

A big reason I wanted to go to a rural school is to deal with some lower SES [socio-economic status] students with the more difficult backgrounds and just experience that a bit, which I have but it's been emotionally draining for me and difficult.

Among these pre-service teachers, there was an ambivalence about the relationship between staff and students. Some of them commented, even before the placement, that they were looking forward to working in small-size classes and to a closer relationship between teacher, students, and the broader community. Notions and ideas of rural schooling were already formed in some of the participants, including in those with no prior rural experience. For example, Caroline who was about to

do her first experience teaching and living in a rural community, stated in her pre-placement interview round that:

> The reason I chose a rural environment was because I thought it would be an interesting experience; something completely different to being in a metropolitan environment. I guess also I like the idea of the classes potentially being smaller in student number, so having that more close-knit community and being able to just target students a lot easier.

Other pre-service teachers also with no rural experience, gathered evidence and information through informal conversations with their peers in the teacher education program. For example, Max, who grew up in Melbourne, said that part of his "inside" to rural teaching was "just from conversations with teachers that have taught rurally." He added:

> I don't know too much but I just understand that it's slightly more casual. It's not a stressful environment and trying to send all these kids to university, achieving great results. I guess there's more - I don't know if it's an appreciation but more of an acceptance of not everyone having to go to university. So there's a bit less pressure in that sense.

Max's comments resonate with those above by Oscar: the feeling that the pace was slower, and pressure was lesser in rural schooling than it was in urban schools. Other participants were also keen to compare urban and rural students' aspirations and their teacher-mentor expectations of students, finding different aspiration and expectation levels in urban placements. Indeed, these pre-service teachers' views resonate with policy and research that ascribe a poverty of aspirations to those from non-urban and low socio-economic backgrounds (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; see Cuervo, 2020; Dalley-Trim & Alloway 2010; Zipin et al., 2015 for a critique of this poverty of aspirations). Of course, rural students aspire to high-status post-school pathways and careers (see Cuervo, 2012; 2014; Dalley-Trim & Alloway, 2010). However, both in policy realms (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008), as well as in these pre-service teachers views, there is a notion that rural students do not have the same aspirations (e.g. attending university) as those of their peers in metropolitan schools.

At all stages of their placements, almost all participants compared rural schools and students with their urban counterparts. (Participants first completed an urban school placement, and later the rural one.) While perhaps it seems expected that individuals might compared a second experience with the previous one, what is important to state here, and is developed below, is that participants relentlessly compared in the "during" and "after" placement interviews the rural school and community life, teaching practices, staff relations, and rural students, to their first urban placement post. Comparisons were constant, including in the majority of question were a comparison was not requested. For example, participants compared the expectations of school staff regarding academic excellence, which was often equated with transition to university studies, in urban and rural schools. There was a consensus that students in rural schools were not expected to perform at the same standards as their urban peers. Pathways other than university were viewed as acceptable and expected, while, as a participant put it, "teachers in my city school have an expectation that students will get into university". Of course, university studies is not the only post-school pathway that young people should follow but implicit here is a normative construction that the "ideal" or "highest" pathway is to aspire to continue with university studies. (Australian education policies contribute to the view that a university career is the "ideal" post-school pathway – see Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Furthermore, a significant factor in this difference of normative aspirations between urban and rural schools was the view, by participants in this study, that students in rural schools come from more "diverse", "challenging", and "low socioeconomic" backgrounds.

As one of the participants, Veronica, who in her previous placement taught at a private school in Melbourne, affirmed:

> Lots of them have very rough backstories and come from very working-class families and parents don't support them educationally. Lots of kids have taken years off school where they weren't doing any schooling at all or have trouble at home and there's just so much that they come to school with - they don't really know how to do things so it's kind of a struggle to teach anything.

For some participants, this was a significant portion of the appeal to undertake a rural placement. As Veronica put it: "it is an opportunity to train yourself in a challenging environment". Further, returning to Oscar's above comment, participants in this study, particularly those without a rural background, viewed the rural placement as a training ground, "something completely different", "a challenge", and "a rite of passage" in their fresh teaching careers. Teaching in a rural school was an opportunity to sharpen their skills, as several of them consider classroom management and student aspiration a focal issue in this placement, and a way to improve their opportunities to find a desirable teaching post in a metropolitan setting.

In some ways, unfortunately, rural teaching was seen as a space to condition their capabilities, a means to an end. While conviviality, mutuality and community support were welcomed aspects of working and living in a rural area, students' low socioeconomic background, classroom behavior and even material deficits (e.g. lack of heating in some classrooms, lower ratio of computers to students than in urban private schools) were seen as a challenge but also as an ideal training ground at this stage of their careers. The problem with this view is the potential devaluation of the cultural and material status of rural students, staff and schools, exacerbated by a constant comparison with their previous urban placement experience. In some ways, participants held over rural teaching and life a sense of extraversion (Massey, 2005): attached to the local, as they were related to the mutualism and warmth of rural communities but their connection was with the urban, in so far as being the norm to compare rural teaching and as a desire to return to work in metropolitan schools. In this misrecognition of rurality one cannot avoid but feel that there is a process of "Othering", the rural as the "other", a place simply "out there" (Green & Letts, 2007), which of course denotes a hierarchy (also present in education policy) with the urban as the standard. In the next section, I turn to discuss pre-service teachers' views and experiences through the lenses of a theory of distribution and recognition.

Discussion

Participants' comments, intertwining romanticized views of rural schooling and life as a close-knit community with deficit discourses on students' aspirations and rural teaching, resonate with prior studies on this matter. For instance, Adie and Barton's (2012) research on urban pre-service teachers' views of rural teaching found that before undertaking their placement, their participants held similar romanticized perceptions of rural life mixed with understandings of teaching outside the metropolis as a difficult challenge. Just as with the participants in this study, these deficit views are slowly and carefully built by an assemblage of factors. Some of these factors are the lack of rural teaching content in many university teacher education courses (Lock, 2008) and a lack of focus on *place* in teacher education with its over-emphasis on being 'classroom-ready' rather than as White and Kline (2012) have argued 'community-ready'. The latter emphasis on community can make pre-service teachers attentive to, and value, the specificity of the locale or place where they will work and the culture of their students. Finally, another factor is the

perennial "positioning of rural schools as deficit as opposed to different, in policy reforms" (White, 2019, p. 144), and the constant use of rural schooling and students in policies and government inquiries as a group lagging behind their urban counterparts, as a "problem" needed to be fixed, a "vulnerable" group not conforming to the metrocentric norm and not achieving (e.g. in standardized tests, or transitions to higher education) the same metrics and standards as the rest of the Australian population (Roberts & Cuervo, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013).

Despite this cultural de-valorization of rural places and education, it is often understood that there is a problem of distribution of resources in rural education (see Commonwealth Schools Commission 1988; HREOC 2000, Halsey 2018). Pre-service teachers in this study also pointed out to the lack of some resources, such as computers or heaters in the classrooms, or access to extracurricular activities beyond the school walls, as well as a need for more rural education content in their teacher education degree. A better distribution of resources is invoked as a mechanism to level the playing field between urban and rural schools, and as a way of delivering a better quality of education and a better experience of teaching and learning in rural environments (DET, 2021; Halsey, 2018). The goal here is to achieve a distributive parity with metropolitan schools, which are constantly the benchmark by which policy but also these pre-service teachers assess rural schooling. In other words, and following Rawls (1972), a better distribution of resources through major social institutions (e.g. government, higher education institutions) is needed to close the gap between urban and rural schools. (Needless to say, not all urban schools have an abundance of resources, nor are all rural schools lacking, but the point is that urban is taken as the "norm" to which the rural, the "Other", should aspire to.)

Thus far, it is clear from pre-service teachers' comments and experiences that the problem of attracting teachers to rural schools is anchored in the distributive and recognition dimensions of justice. For instance, participants in this study pointed out the need for more resources in the school (e.g. computers, heaters) and also argued for more resources allocated to the learning of rural education in their teacher education degree. Thus, as Fraser's (2003) perspectival dualism of justice, issues of rural staffing require both redistribution and recognition. That is, while more resources at the school level and the teacher education program level can redress above mentioned inequalities; in terms of recognition the "remedy for injustice is cultural" (Fraser, 2003, p. 13). In this instance, both institutions and pre-service

teachers come short of providing the appropriate cultural recognition to rural education.

Following Fraser's examples of "recognition paradigm", and despite this university's effort to ameliorate the material disparities in rural staffing, there is a "nonrecognition", or at least not sufficiently, of the relevance of rural teaching in teacher education programs delivered in Australian higher education institutions (see Lock, 2008); in so far, participants in this study looked for informal sources of information and knowledge among their peers and social networks about what it entails to teach in rural schools. In addition, pre-service teachers' understanding and evaluation of their rural experience through the lenses of their previous urban school placement might position rural school communities to what Fraser describes as "cultural domination": "being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture" (p. 13). It is true that comparisons between a previous and current experience could be expected; however, as mentioned before, the constant comparison on almost all aspects of their rural placement, even stated in their "after" placement interview, and the construction of a hierarchy that could be seen as "othering" or exoticizing rural teaching resonates with Fraser's arguments of cultural domination and disrespect, in which experiences or patterns of cultural value are "different and less worthy" (Fraser, 2003, p. 15).

In other words, at an institutional level there seems to exist a de-valorization of rural schooling in the insufficient materials and knowledge circulating in teacher education programs. At the personal level, the de-valorization occurs with pre-service teachers view of rural education as an "Other", a residual place. Here, pre-service teachers compared their students with those from urban areas and assess their "difficult" classroom behavior and "lack" of post-school aspirations with those from metropolitan places. As a consequence, rural students and schools are viewed through a deficit lens, a space that serves as the perfect ground to equip yourself, a pre-service teacher, with the appropriate training and skills that can enhance the chances of securing a teaching job in an increasingly precarious teaching labor market by demonstrating one's ability to teach 'difficult' students (Cuervo, 2016; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

The perennial difficulty to properly staff rural schools appears to make self-evident that a proper redistribution of resources is of highest priority. At the same time, the comments and experiences by participants in this study make it clear that a focus on recognition is also important to redress the problem of attracting and retaining teachers to rural schools.

As per participants' comments, a lack of prominence of rural education in their teacher education program signifies what Fraser (2003, p. 29) sees as "status subordination". This occurs when "institutions structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede parity of participation" to all social actors and (education) systems and sectors.

Honneth agrees with the need for distribution and recognition to remedy injustices, such as shortage of rural school staffing. Where Honneth departs from Fraser's synthesis of distribution and recognition is in his belief that distributive claims are subordinate to aspects of recognition. For Honneth (2003, p. 114), "even distributional injustices must be understood as the institutional expression of social disrespect" or "of unjustified relations of recognition". The point for Honneth, and relevant to this study and rural schooling, is the withholding of recognition and cultural valuation by institutions and individuals, which position rural education and teaching as a residual space – a place that pre-service teachers see as the ideal ground to condition their skills. Further, it is hard to know if a lack of material resources (e.g. computers, heaters) is primarily linked to a social disrespect for rural schooling by the state, but the imagination by teacher education programs and pre-service teachers of rural schools and communities as training grounds or places simply "out there" (Green & Letts, 2007), devoid of cultural relevance and assessed through metropolitan lenses, generates what Honneth (2007, p. 71) sees as a "moral injustice", where (rural) "subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve". This "disrespect" is built from the assembly of factors, experiences, and ideas of rurality as the Other, that is always hierarchical, and is constructed through a sense of extraversion (Massey, 2005): the outside – the urban – defines the local – the rural.

For Honneth, in interpersonal relations, moral experiences of injustice are to be viewed as feelings of "social disrespect". Just as individuals that are denied recognition by others are said to be disrespected and denigrated in their ways of life (Honneth, 1995), so rural teaching could be seen as disrespected when its cultural significance occupies a second place in a teacher education program, when pre-service teachers view it as a means to an ends, or when policies designed to attract teachers to the space contain clauses that allow those that take the offer to "exit" to a perceived "better" job and place in a metropolitan area (Roberts & Downes, 2020; White, 2019). Thus, if we follow Honneth's moral grammar of justice, at the core of the rural injustices is not just the need for more resources but primarily a perennial cultural devaluation and social disrespect of rural schooling and community.

Conclusion

It is clear form research and policy studies, as well from these pre-service teachers' experiences, that the focus to solve the perennial rural staffing problem should be a matter of economic and cultural justice. It is also important to state that these pre-service teachers undertook their placement with the best intentions and while they viewed it as a space and time to condition their teaching skills, they were also positive about their experiences and working and living in rural areas. Part of the problem originates in the deficit status that education policy and teacher education programs give rural schooling (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; DEEWR, 2011; Lock, 2008; Roberts & Downes, 2020). That is, institutional patterns of misrecognition of rural life and knowledge are present in the constant positionality of rural schooling as deficient, as lagging behind its urban peers. Thus, this misrecognition of the rural seems to be at the core of current injustices. It is then unsurprising that pre-service teachers might adopt, even inadvertently, this deficit view.

As Roberts and Downes (2020) point out, the education policy (DET, 2021) over-emphasis on a politics of distribution through the allocation of financial, material and labor incentives and rewards for those that venture to take a rural teaching posting serve to reaffirm that something is wrong with rural schools; thus, devaluating rural teaching and a rural way of life. As mentioned above, positioning an "exit strategy" to an urban school as a professional reward for teaching in rural schools reaffirms in these and other pre-service teachers that working outside the metropolis is just too hard. In doing so, it applies and reinforces a metro-normative perspective on rural schooling and living.

The justice frameworks of Fraser (2003) and Honneth (2003) help illuminate the relevance of recognition issues in terms of the need for a re-signification of rural knowledges and ways of being at an institutional and individual level. Just as more financial and material resources might be needed for some rural schools to attract teachers, there is also seems to be a need for an institutional and policy valorization of rural teaching as a valuable career pathway for new and experienced teachers, and a re-signification of rural knowledges and rural ways of being. Further, recognizing rural knowledge and experiences as valuable in higher education teacher education programs also helps to make graduate teachers not just "classroom-ready" but also "community-ready" (White & Kline, 2012). Ultimately, while Fraser and Honneth might disagree in their dualist and monist approaches to justice, what it is clear is that a just distribution of resources has not been sufficient to solve the perennial challenge of rural staffing. Emanating from the data in this study and from both theorists' frameworks is that at the root of the problem of rural staffing, there is a problem of cultural recognition of rural education, places and knowledges by policy, higher education institutions and individuals.

References

Adie, L., & Barton, G. (2012). Urban pre-service teachers' conceptions of teaching in rural communities. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(6), 111-123. https://doi.10.3316/informit.768321753000823

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2012). *Local government area analysis*. ABS.

Azano, A.P., Downey, J., & Brenner, D. (2019). Preparing pre-service teachers for rural schools. In J. Lampert (Ed.). *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.274

Biddle, C., & Azano, A. P. (2016). Constructing and reconstructing the "rural school problem" a century of rural education research. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 298-325. https://doi:10.3102/0091732X16667700

Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). *Teaching and learning: Maximising our investment in Australian schools*. Standing Committee on EEWR. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_Employment_and_Workplace_Relations/Completed_inquiries/2010-13/teachinglearning/report/index

Commonwealth of Australia. (2008). *Review of Australian higher education: Final report (Bradley Review)*. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2008-12/apo-nid15776.pdf

Commonwealth Schools Commission. (1988). *Schooling in rural Australia*. Australian Government Publishing Service. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/1988-03/apo-nid34300.pdf

Commonwealth Schools Commission (1975). *Report for the Triennium 1976-1978*. Australian Government Publishing Service. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED117594.pdf

Council for the Australian Federation (2007) *Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in*

Australia. Department of Premier and Cabinet. https://www.caf.gov.au/Documents/TheFutureof SchoolinginAustralia.pdf

Corbett, M., & Gereluk, D. (Eds.). (2020). *Rural teacher education: Connecting land and people*. Springer.

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.

Cuervo, H. (2012). Enlarging the social justice agenda in education: an analysis of rural teachers' narratives beyond the distributive dimension. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 83-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2012.669829

Cuervo, H. (2014). Critical reflections on youth and equality in the rural context. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(4), 544-557. https://doi.org/10.1080 /13676261.2013.844781

Cuervo, H. (2016). *Understanding social justice in rural education*. Palgrave.

Cuervo, H. (2020). Rethinking teachers' production of social justice in rural schools. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24(13), 1357-1371. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116 .2018.1526338

Cuervo, H., Corbett, M., & White, S. (2019). Disrupting rural futures and teachers' work. In S. Pinto, S. Hannigan, B. Walker-Gibbs, & Emma Charlton (eds.). *Interdisciplinary unsettlings of place and space* (pp. 87-100). Springer.

Dalley-Trim, L. & Alloway, N. (2010) Looking 'outward and onward' in the outback: regional Australian students' aspirations and expectations for their future as framed by dominant discourses of further education and training. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 37 (2), 107-125. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03216925

Department of Education & Training (DET) (2021). *Review of rural and remote incentives report*. DET. https://www.vic.gov.au/targeted-initiative-attract-more-teachers

Department of Education & Training (DET) (2005) *Review of Education and Training Legislation: Discussion Paper*. Office of Strategy & Review, DET.

Department of Education & Training (2003) *Blueprint for Government Schools: Future directions for education in the Victorian government school system*. Communication Division, DET. http://ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Vic-non-AV-4-DET-2003-Blueprint-for-Government-Schools.pdf

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2011) *Review of Funding for Schooling—Final Report*.

DEEWR. https://www.education.gov.au/school-funding/resources/review-funding-schooling-final-report-december-2011

Fraser, N. (2003). Social justice in the age of identity politics: Redistribution, recognition, and participation. In N. Fraser, & A. Honneth (Eds.). *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (pp. 7–109). Verso.

Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the 'postsocialist' condition*. Routledge.

Green, B., & Letts, W. (2007). Space, equity and rural education: A "trialectical" account. In K. Gulson, & C. Symes (Eds.). *Spatial theories of education: Policy and geography matters* (pp.57-76). Routledge.

Halsey, J. (2018). *Independent review into regional rural and remote education*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. https://www .education.gov.au/quality-schools-package/resources/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education-final-report

Honneth, A. (2007). *Disrespect: The normative foundations of critical theory*. Polity Press.

Honneth, A. (2003). Redistribution as Recognition: A response to Nancy Fraser. In N. Fraser, & A. Honneth (Eds.). *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (pp. 110-197). Verso.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. MIT Press.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (2000). *Emerging themes: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://humanrights .gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/human_rig hts/rural_remote/emerging_themes.pdf

Lock, G. (2008). Preparing Teachers for Rural Appointments: Lessons from Australia. *Rural Educator*, 29 (2), 24-30. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v29i2.470

Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. Sage.

Moffa, E., & McHenry-Sorber, E. (2018). Learning to Be Rural: Lessons about Being Rural in Teacher Education Programs. *The Rural Educator*, 39 (1), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v39i1.213

Myschool website (2018) Government school data. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. Accessed 19/09/2018: https://www.myschool.edu.au/

Rawls, J. (1972). *A theory of justice*. Clarendon Press.

Richmond, W.K. (1953). *The rural school: Its problems and prospects*. Alvin Redman.

Roberts, P., & Cuervo, H. (2015). What next for rural education research? *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 25(3), 1-8.

Roberts, P. & Green, B. (2013). Researching rural places: On social justice and rural education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(10), 765-774. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800413503795

Roberts, P. & Downes, N. (2020). *Incentivising the Profession: A national mapping of incentives to attract and retain staff in Australian non-metropolitan communities*. Centre for Sustainable Communities. https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/52676939/Incentivising_the_Profession.pdf

Sharplin, E. (2009). Bringing them in: The experiences of imported and overseas-qualified teachers. *Australian Journal of Education*, 53(2), 192-206. https://doi.org/10.1177/000494410905300207

Sharplin, E. (2002). Rural retreat or outback hell: Expectations of rural and remote teaching. *Issues in Educational Research*, 12, 49-63. http://www.iier.org.au/iier12/sharplin.html

Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition*. Princeton University Press.

Welsh, E. (2002). Dealing with Data: Using NVivo in the Qualitative Data Analysis Process. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2), 1-9. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-3.2.865

White, S. (2019). Recruiting, retaining and supporting early career teachers for rural schools. In Attracting and keeping the best teachers. In A. Sullivan, B. Johnson & M. Simons (Eds.). *Attracting and Keeping the Best Teachers: Issues and Opportunities* (pp. 143-159). Springer.

White, S., & Kline, J. (2012). Developing a Rural Teacher Education Curriculum Package. *The Rural Educator*, 33(2). https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v33i2.417

Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton University Press.

Zipin, L., Sellar, S., Brennan, M., & Gale, T. (2015). Educating for futures in marginalized regions: A sociological framework for rethinking and researching aspirations. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(3), 227–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.839376

Author:

Hernan Cuervo is Professor in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. Contact: hicuervo@unimelb.edu.au

Suggested Citation: