

Teacher Collegiality in a Remote Australian School

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Teachers' lives and teachers' work remain important areas of educational research today, particularly given the influence of school-based management and the significance of shared leadership in schools. Almost nowhere do the two research fields intersect more closely than in the remote school setting, where teacher turnover is high and the recruitment of experienced teachers is difficult. This article investigates the realities of teachers living and working together in a small school located in a remote, northern Australian, Aboriginal community. It highlights environmental conditions that can be challenging for teachers, both new and recent graduates and those with experience. The research draws attention to collegial community building in a geographically remote location, particularly the development of material and emotional support systems, as a means of managing some of these challenges.

In my role as a teacher educator I often talk to student teachers about their career aspirations. Recently, a young woman in her last semester of study for a secondary teaching qualification came to ask my advice on whether she should accept a contract that would tie her to 2 years' employment in any school in a fairly isolated region of the state. When I asked her what she thought might be the worst that could happen to her if she spent 2 years in a rural/remote school, her reply was instantaneous: "I might dry up inside and lose all my enthusiasm for teaching" (see also the principal's comments in Mills & Gale, 2003). This student was demonstrating a point made very clearly at the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1999)—that metropolitan teacher graduates have a very limited understanding of rural Australia.

Australia is a vast country which, when compared to the size of other nations, is very sparsely populated. Capital cities of the eight states and territories are all located on the coasts except for the national capital,¹ and the urban drift has for many years been coastward, leaving much of the interior of Australia low in human resources. As the young student teacher above demonstrated, many city dwellers have an image of rural Australia as isolated, dry, and dying. It must certainly be said that many parts of Australia are hot and dry, with transport and communication services less readily available than those in the urban regions. However, it is the notion that teaching in rural and remote communities can be detrimental to one's professional and personal health that will be challenged in this article.

This article is a case study of a teaching community in an isolated, Aboriginal center in northern Australia. It

is a study of collegiality, a practice that involves teachers working professionally together and supporting their colleagues socially and emotionally. It seeks to establish what collegiality looks like in practice in a remote school and the benefits that teachers obtain from it. To do so, a brief outline of some of the benefits of teacher collegiality is first provided. This is followed by a description of the research setting. The way collegiality is enacted in this setting is then described using rich qualitative data. Finally, some implications of the study are provided.

Benefits of Teacher Collegiality

The importance of teacher collegiality in any school is not a new recognition by any means (see for example Hargreaves, 1994; Jarzabkowski, 2002; Little, 1990; Nias, 1998; Nias, Southworth & Yeomans, 1989). However, its importance in a remote teaching location is especially significant, sufficiently so that the Western Australian Department of Education, for example, makes the ability to work collegially one of the essential criteria for the employment of teachers for its Remote Teaching Service.

In remote regions of Australia, the teaching service is composed largely of young, relatively inexperienced teachers. These teachers do not have the same opportunities for professional development that can be readily provided to their city colleagues. They rely on rare visits from education consultants, Internet services and discussion forums and the professional expertise of their local colleagues. As noted by Moriarty, Danaher, and Danaher (2003), people living in the outback need to have resilience if they are to survive, and

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¹ The national capital, Canberra, was designed and purposely built after selection of the site in 1908. It was deliberately located inland between two larger coastal cities, Sydney and Melbourne, because there was no agreement on which city should house the federal parliament.

this readily translates to outback teachers. Such resilience, I posit, is developed through collegial relationships.

Teacher resiliency, according to the definition used by Bobek (2002, p. 202), is “the ability to adjust to varied situations and increase one’s competence in the face of adverse conditions.” Similarly, Patterson and Patterson (2001, p. 51) see resilience for teachers as “using energy productively within a supportive school environment to achieve goals in the face of adverse conditions.” Adverse conditions, according to Bobek, “serve as catalysts for the creation of resilience” (p. 202). She suggests that one means of adjusting to negative conditions is through the development of significant adult relationships. In a remote teaching setting, these relationships would most naturally be created with one’s teaching colleagues. The flexibility required to adjust to adverse conditions could be read as one’s ability to accept change as a part of one’s ongoing work.

Patterson and Patterson (2001) suggest that a culture of resilience is necessary if teachers are to face educational change successfully. Fullan (1991) maintains that the power for change lies in teacher collaboration. He suggests that, for educational change to happen, teachers need to understand themselves and be understood by others. Fullan maintains that his work and many other studies have revealed that educational change is most successful when collegial practices are in place.

[A]t the teacher level the degree of change was strongly related to the extent to which teachers *interact* with each other and others providing technical help. Within the school, collegiality among teachers, as measured by the frequency of communication, mutual support, help etc., was a strong indicator of implementation success. (Fullan, 1991, pp. 131-132; emphasis in original)

For significant educational change to take place there must be changes in beliefs, values, and assumptions that lead to changes in teaching styles and practices. Fullan (1991, p. 132) discusses what he terms “the primacy of personal contact” through which teachers can be introduced to new ideas that they can then accept, modify, or reject. This is important for teachers coming for the first time into a remote teaching setting where conventional teaching practices do not necessarily work with Indigenous Australian students.

Little (1990) contends that schools benefit from promoting closer collegial networks among their teachers in other ways as well. One practical benefit is the orchestration of the daily work of teaching across classrooms. Teachers who work collegially are better prepared to support one another (Little). The whole school community gains the confidence of a better understanding of the programs being taught. Another important benefit to the school is that teachers become more open to new ideas, teaching methods, and resources.

They become more adaptable and self-reliant in times of change, and cope better with new demands that would normally exhaust the energy and resources of teachers working on their own (Little).

Another significant benefit to schools that adopt collegial practices is that the burden of staff turnover is reduced. A collegial environment greatly assists new and beginning teachers (Little, 1990; Nias, 1998), and thus benefits the school as an organization. Woods and Weasmer (2002) argue that collegiality enhances job satisfaction for teachers, thus reducing attrition. In terms of rural or remote teaching positions, this is important because teacher turnover is generally quite high in these schools. Hughes (1999) makes a clear link between positive teacher attitude and student achievement in rural schools. Such positive attitudes must be connected to professional, social, and emotional relationships among teachers in schools.

In fact, perhaps the most obvious benefit of collegiality is that which is afforded to teachers themselves. My own research (Jarzabkowski, 2002) revealed that primary (elementary school) teachers greatly value the social and emotional aspects of teacher collegiality. Nias et al. (1989) note also that collaborative staffs are usually happy and resilient, but more specific benefits are also to be gained. Nias (1998) suggests that a teacher’s need for colleagues and collegial practices frequently varies depending on the stage of a teacher’s career.

Beginning teachers need their colleagues for survival, that is, for the help and support that set them off on their career paths. They require practical professional support in the form of materials, constructive advice, relief from paperwork, administration, or out-of-class chores, and tactful intervention with recalcitrant children (Nias, 1998). As well as this beginning teachers require emotional support, mostly in the form of reassurance, which is usually provided by older and more experienced staff members. Yet a caring and helping community does not necessarily apply only to beginning teachers but can be beneficial for all teachers in schools.

Surprisingly to Nias (1998) collegial relationships become even more important to teachers in the later stages of their careers. She suggests that this could be because at this stage they have greater confidence in their ability and more experience in their craft so therefore wish to make their mark or influence others in a positive, professional manner. As teachers become increasingly skilled practitioners they “look to other teachers both for new ideas, stimulation and challenge and as the potential recipients of their own knowledge and expertise” (Nias, p. 1264). Mid-career teachers seek professional extension from their colleagues, and some also want to extend the professional growth of others. There is a sense of satisfaction in the collegial relationships created by more experienced teachers.

This holds well with the research of Graves (2001) into strategies that encourage teachers to maintain their energy levels and keep their teaching innovative. High on his list of energy givers is collegiality. Graves found that “[W]hen teachers had strong emotional connections with colleagues their teaching energy was high” (p. 12). As also noted by Donaldson (2001, p. 111), “[A]cknowledging the emotional realities of others’ work naturally builds caring relationships and creates a level of authenticity that strengthens the group’s capacity to respond to challenges.” This certainly appeared to be the case in my study of a remote school community, the circumstances of which are described below.

The Context of the Study

Nangala Community School (a pseudonym) is located within a remote region of northern Australia on the edge of the desert. It services a community of approximately 650 people. The only non-Aboriginal members of the community are service workers, most significantly health, education, and council employees. While there are a few communities with smaller populations within a 150 km radius, the closest town, with about 3000 people, is almost 300 kms away. Without all-weather road access in any direction, during the wet season the only transport into and out of the community is via light aircraft.

My presence in the community originated out of a much larger, essentially government funded project to examine literacy and numeracy strategies being employed by teachers of Indigenous Australian students. Nangala Community School was chosen as a case study because it was deemed to be a worthy example of good education practices in the region. It was my experience of talking to the teachers about their work at the school that prompted me to examine more deeply one of my own research interests, teacher collegiality, which is the basis of this article.

At the time of this research, Nangala Community School had a non-teaching principal and eight teachers, all of whom were recruited within the past 1 or 2 years. The school had a number of Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs) who worked with preschool and primary classes. Only one of the teachers at Nangala was a new graduate, but this teacher had undertaken her degree as a mature age student. Two of the teachers and the principal had been educators for over 25 years, and, besides the new graduate, all teachers had at least 8 years’ experience. To find a remote school with such experienced teachers is extremely rare, which was possibly one reason why Nangala presented such an interesting case study.

The school educated students from Preschool to Year 10. There were over 100 school aged children in the community, but regular attendance was significantly less than this. All students at the school were Indigenous Australians, except

two who were children of teachers at the school. The school was composed of seven classes: a preschool/kindergarten, four composite primary classes (Years PrePrimary/1, 2/3, 4/5, 6/7), and two composite secondary classes (one male, one female).

Like many remote community schools in Australia, staff at Nangala Community School faced some significant teaching challenges. Student absenteeism, through truancy and transience, was significant, so teachers were never sure how many students they would have from one day to another. Low levels of literacy are common to most Indigenous Australian communities where English is not a first language, and in this community Standard Australian English was not used anywhere outside the school. Low post-primary retention rates were another problem, with the student population rapidly reducing from Year 8 onward. Health problems were rife in the community and many children suffered from otitis media, a problem that brought about substantial loss of hearing for some children. Substance abuse, particularly petrol sniffing among school students and other youth, and alcohol among youth and adults, was a difficult problem to combat in the community.

However, somewhat surprisingly under these conditions, teachers at Nangala appeared to take pleasure in their work and enjoy being part of a small community. They were obviously thriving in what to many urban teachers would be a difficult environment. Teachers at Nangala appeared to have significant levels of resilience that kept them energized. While maintaining a focus on the funded project at hand, I also sought to determine the source of this resilience.

I spent one week in the community, interviewing teachers, teaching assistants, students, adult education workers, and a few parents and community members. During this time I also observed teaching staff at work and joined in their professional development and social activities. I was immediately struck by the sense of collegiality among the teachers. I was also pleasantly surprised at the eagerness of the staff to make me feel welcome and the encouragement that I was offered to join in all aspects of social life, which during that week included having dinner at the homes of three different staff members, each time in the company of several other teachers from the school. It was through these experiences that this article was born.

How Teacher Collegiality is Enacted in a Remote School Setting

One of the most obvious differences in teaching in a remote school such as Nangala is the intersection of life and work. It is difficult to achieve a great deal of privacy in any small community, but in this situation there are limited opportunities to leave the immediate surrounds of the community during term time.

We're in a community where we're here 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, so it creates a whole different agenda from a normal school. (Principal)

It's very much a community feeling, because we live here, and because the school provides your outside entertainment. Your work and your personal life focus on the school and the community. Your work and your private life are so close together. It's so important for everyone to get on, all to be able to work together. (Janice)²

The building of links with the immediate school community, that is, other professional staff, is important, but equally so is it important to become involved in the wider community. Cultural barriers do exist but with sensitivity and awareness can be overcome.

The staff are quite interested in what goes on in the community, like the football match on the weekend, . . . joining in, where they are invited. If a teacher is not willing to establish those links with the community then you find the divide more entrenched, not to think that you're just part of the community but to share in it. (Principal)

Equally, the teaching staff must be able to acknowledge that they are only a small part of the wider community and that self-determination for Indigenous Australian people means that teachers should not expect to solve community problems or direct community outcomes. Part of being resilient means accepting the things you cannot change.

Even though the school is a big part of this community, you can't control what happens within the community. And it's really important that teachers understand [that] . . . because that's the difference between being satisfied with what you're doing and getting frustrated and getting despondent and thinking it's hopeless. (Principal)

One of the key features of the teaching community at Nangala was the obvious shared beliefs about working in the community. The sharing of similar goals seemed to be important to the staff.

And everybody's got a similar goal. They want it to work. They have the same frustrations. We all have kids that don't appear and new kids [who do], and you can share those things [with other staff].

. . . And I don't think we've got people here who are here just for the money. (Kim)

Although teachers in remote schools do receive a special allowance above their regular salary, there has to be more than a financial reason for working in such a challenging environment. There has to be a zeal for working with Indigenous Australian students.

The staff is very welcoming. And the staff love the children. There's not a single staff member here who wouldn't put their arm around a child and give them a big hug if they needed it, and vice versa. (Pat)

There appears to be an informal introduction or enculturation from existing staff to new staff that helps the latter understand the culture of the school.

This is a great group [of teachers]. They're working very well. It really makes a difference, like the core group of people who are here have been here a year and a half now . . . so they can support the new ones coming in. I think that's important, and we've also got history and knowledge to share with them. We have an idea of what's been happening over the last year. I think we're working towards some shared goals. There seems to be no really divergent, really opposing views, which is really important in a small community like this. (Janice)

Of course, one of the important factors in developing collegiality is the building of professional community. Teachers must not lose sight of the purpose of their work, and the fact that, regardless of the adverse environment in which they teaching, they are professionals.

One of the strengths at the moment . . . has been the maturity and experience of the staff that are here. . . . So there's a lot to offer, there's [a] lot of people with curriculum backgrounds, good, fresh curriculum backgrounds. I think the mix of people is very good. . . . We work together well. (Kelly)

And when we sit down and have a meeting, everybody seems to have some experience to contribute to the discussion. There's an understanding. People can bring their different backgrounds into play. (Kim)

Teachers need to be supported so that they can be creative and innovative. An environment that allows risk-taking by teachers and allows them to share decision making in

² Pseudonyms have been used for the teacher respondents in this article.

their workplace is more likely to provide job satisfaction (Woods & Weasmer, 2002).

We really need to let teachers think outside the square. (Principal)

I find the school . . . very supportive in trying things, so if I say, “Can I do this or would I be able to go here?” we can look through the logistics—so very supportive. (Janice)

I think everyone’s really keen to try a lot of new things, like the computers, they’re really taking off. They’re really useful for language activities. . . . I think once people find their feet they’re keen to try new things and get things going. (Chris)

Part of being a professional in a challenging teaching environment is recognizing the need to be flexible and to be able to adjust quickly to changing conditions. Community instability at Nangala meant that teachers were never sure of the mood of the student group, nor the number of students who would be present on any one day.

Those words like “adaptable” and “flexible,” they get bandied about a lot but they are incredibly important here. . . . You need to be able to take the teaching moment. You have to be prepared to say, “This isn’t going to work today,” depending on the group of children. (Pat)

It is important not to forget that, aside from the professional relationships developed through collegial practices, social and emotional supports also build community. Teachers who know one another on a more personal level are more likely to work together collaboratively (Jarzabkowski, 2002). In remote communities with small Indigenous Australian populations, the friendship circles are indeed limited for teachers, and tend automatically to form around those with similar backgrounds and professions.

Building staff community, that’s a pretty crucial sort of thing. We encourage people to go on group trips. We’ve had barbecues, at least once or twice a term. The staff have now got into the pattern of having other staff over for dinner some time. When [consultants] have come in, we’ve used that as excuses to celebrate a bit, so that’s been good. That’s also been possible with a better mix on staff. (Principal)

And we’re fairly social, like, you can go into anybody’s house and have a cup of tea. There’s no conflict. (Kim)

From my own personal experience visiting the community, the social aspect of teacher collegiality was very evident. Such activities also encourage the building of resilience (Bobek, 2002). They encourage emotional support that teachers may not have when living a long way from their families and friends.

I think the main strength of this school is the people here. I think we [the teachers] get along really well and there’s real support for each other. Like there’s always someone you can debrief on your day, so if you’ve had a bad day there’s always someone you can talk to about things, someone who’ll say, “What about this idea?” or there’s someone you can celebrate with when you have successes in the classroom, because they understand. (Chris)

Such support seemed to be critical to survival. Teachers explained how they could rely on their colleagues to understand their concerns, both personal and professional, and lend them a supporting ear.

I see this year the staff working very well together as a team and supporting each other and providing a very nurturing environment for each other, because when you come out to a place like this your personality and how you fit into the school is as important as your ability to teach. (Pat)

This is an interesting statement in that this teacher saw collegiality as being as important as the craft of teaching. Being able to “fit into” a remote teaching community was seen as critical to survival.

Implications of this Study

Without attempting to establish causal links among factors discussed in this single study, it is clear that teacher relationships were important in this remote educational setting. Teachers at Nangala, very isolated professionally and personally by urban standards, developed a special form of connectivity with their school colleagues. This community that they developed has the benefit of helping them achieve their goals under some quite adverse conditions. Collegiality at this school was demonstrated in teachers working professionally together and supporting one another socially and emotionally.

Collegiality appears to become much more significant in a geographically isolated environment. It appears to provide the basis for the resilience necessary for teachers to work in such a setting. Teachers at Nangala developed a culture of collegiality that helped them discount their geographical marginalization. It is posited that such a culture grew out of a need to overcome adverse conditions, but at the same

time this group of teachers held positive attitudes that helped create the culture of collegiality, which in turn may have increased their resilience.

While it cannot be stated categorically from this research that it is the maturity and experience of older teachers that makes them more suitable for employment in rural or remote schools, or that these teachers alone have the required resilience to work in such environments, it is certainly the view of staff at Nangala that the maturity and experience of the teachers are important factors in their success at the school. Certainly staff job satisfaction in this remote setting was high, and there is an indication that teacher attitude and the valuing of collegiality contributed to perceived school success.

So what does this mean in real terms to the young graduating teacher introduced at the beginning of this article? After all, in most cases it is young, inexperienced teachers like her who will staff rural and remote schools. Like teachers in the research of Mills and Gale (2003; see also Moriarty & Gray, 2003): Will she be one of the transients, or alternatively, will she develop the resilience necessary to adjust to a rural/remote school and ultimately to make a positive contribution to that community?

I suggest that much of that depends on the effort of teacher educators, education departments, and school leaders. Positive attitudes to teaching in nonurban schools need to be developed while student teachers are still undertaking their studies, as do collaborative working practices. New graduates are more likely to accept rural and remote placements if they believe the experience will be a positive one.

Practicum placements in rural and remote settings provide opportunities for student teachers to experience first hand life in these schools. However, the positive experience of working in such a setting is largely dependent on the efforts of school principals and teaching staff in that setting. Student teachers, and new teachers in general, need to feel that they are an important part of a larger collegial group, a group that can offer both professional and social/emotional support in unfamiliar territory.

Relationship building among staff members should be considered a priority if we hope to retain teachers in rural and remote schools. Donaldson (2001) notes that the development of staff relationships takes conscious care, and, as Graves (2001, p. 12) points out, "strong, emotionally connected professional relationships are such important energy givers that teachers have to take matters into their own hands to establish these relationships and to advance existing relationships." This is indeed good advice for teachers living and working in rural and remote schools.

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