

Placing Teachers? Sustaining Rural Schooling through Place-consciousness in Teacher Education

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This paper explores two seemingly disparate areas of social inquiry: teacher education and the sustainability of rural communities in Australia. It suggests that these may be usefully understood in close connection with each other, and that healthy rural communities may be supported via reform of the ways in which teacher education prepares graduates for teaching in rural schools. In making this argument we claim that consideration and consciousness of place are important for all teacher education curricula, not merely that on offer in rural and regional centers. We call for metropolitan-based teacher education institutions to consider curriculum practices that take a more active role in fostering healthy and productive rural communities through place-conscious approaches to pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003). At the center of this call is a concern to ensure the provision of high-quality education for children in rural families and the need for well-trained teachers who are personally and professionally equipped to address the educational needs of their communities.

Introduction

In this paper we argue for a closer examination of the ways in which teacher education might better prepare graduates for teaching in rural communities. In keeping with a place conscious (Gruenewald, 2003) approach to teacher education, we speak from our own situation in the Australian context, in the hope that our account will support readers to understand what might be a new place for them, and the specificity of our account will better position us collectively to understand and respond to all places in relationship to each other. Cormack, Green, and Reid (2008) note that place-consciousness works with and from an attention to the *specificity* of particular places or place-communities towards a larger engagement with the challenge of eco-social sustainability.

[As] the Canadian novelist Anne Michaels asserts: “If you know one landscape well, you will look at all other landscapes differently”; and “if you learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another.” (p. 2)

The argument is presented in several stages. We begin by situating our work in the current climate affecting rural communities in Australia—a continent and nation severely affected by drought in recent times, and facing escalating decline in rural populations and social infrastructure. We then focus on the more global concern of recruitment and retention of high quality teachers for rural schools, and examine the sorts of incentive schemes that currently exist in the Australian context to deal with our ongoing rural teacher shortage. Next, in connecting rural teacher recruitment and retention to teacher education, we suggest that teacher education providers can more successfully prepare teachers for rural settings if they understand and enact teacher education curriculum with a consciousness of and attention to the concept of place. Drawing on research into teacher education practice that actively promotes rural schools and communities as an attractive employment option (White, 2006, 2007), we report on a recent case study that highlights the global and programmatic features of a place-conscious curriculum that could be applied to other teacher education experiences. We conclude with the argument that place conscious pedagogies open a way for all teacher

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education institutions to address the needs of rural schools and their communities—and indeed provide a framework for enriching the engagement of all teachers in their school communities, regardless of location.

“Of droughts and flooding rains”:¹ Sustainability in Rural Australia

Sustainability is “a complex and much contested concept, but in essence it can be understood as living in the contemporary moment in such a way as to provide for an equitable and secure future” (Green & Reid, 2004, p. 257). In Australia, both the rural economy and rural education are in a precarious situation. After well over a decade of drought, many rural communities have found themselves in a sliding state of economic downturn (Alston & Kent, 2003, 2006; Prime Minister of Australia, 2007) and as a result face a far more fragile existence than ever before. In over two centuries of European settlement, there has been a regular cycle of drought followed by high spring rainfall and widespread flooding of the major inland river systems. But the current drought has not been relieved in this way for nearly two decades, and the water supplies of inland Australia have been steadily dwindling. In 2007 the then Prime Minister announced the provision of funds for enhancing the exit of farmers from drought affected locations “with dignity,” and offered “assistance to help farmers leave the land where they judge that it is no longer viable to remain.”

Nearly a decade ago, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s *Bush Talks* Report (HREOC, 1999) highlighted the characteristics of the rural decline that continues as the status quo in many rural and remote towns: declining populations, decreasing incomes, decreasing services, and a declining quality of life, with towns progressively losing key services and government assistance. They noted that children in rural and remote Australia are less likely to complete their education than children in regional and urban centers; that agricultural workers are less likely than other Australians to have completed secondary education; and that even where distance education is available (and generally agreed to be adequate for primary students), it remains an unremunerated burden on supervising parents and continues to be a poor substitute for an interactive secondary school.

Rural schools, whether they like it or not, are often at the very sharp end of this economic downturn. In addition to the loss of teaching staff as school numbers decline, rural schools face daily an ever-increasing range of social and welfare issues with which many teachers find themselves ill equipped to deal. Conversely, while the rural school is often

the traditional heart of its community, it is also situated at the focal point of external economic and social influences, as well as political requirements for change and renewal, and therefore functions as the barometer of community well-being. When families in crisis are relocated to cheap rural housing, the school must adapt to the needs of the new children. When drought forces mothers to leave their properties and take up work in the town, the rural school must cope with the loss of parental support and perhaps even a loss of enrollments if the family has to leave its home. When decreasing numbers in rural communities mean that class sizes for some secondary subjects become unviable, then teachers must be relocated, and the options for the younger children in the community are reduced. Roberts (2004) illustrates the challenges of quality schooling in this environment of rural decline:

[In] the infrastructure and community of many rural, regional and remote towns gradually eroding and [faced with] escalation of decline due to drought ... the provision of education has also contracted due to a limitation of the economic benefits of gaining education. When a town is in decline with the availability of employment reducing and social problems multiplying there is little motivation and support for students to endure these hardships and break the cycle. (pp. 8-9)

Through all of this, however, the school remains there, in and for the community. As Halsey (2005) notes: “Schools are often the largest organization in a town or area.... [They] are strategically positioned to be a rallying agency when the town feels under pressure, providing a sense of connection to the past, with the present, and to the future” (p. 6).

Roberts (2004) placed the responsibility for rural schooling outcomes squarely on the ability of state departments of education to place quality teachers in rural schools. While he rightly notes that “the most significant factor in education quality is the provision of appropriate quality stable staff” (p. 4), this analysis can be critiqued in terms of its disregard for the larger social and environmental contexts. There are other impacts of drought on teachers that impact on the ability of centralized state systems to adequately staff rural schools, and these deserve significant attention. When drought impacts student numbers, teacher numbers will obviously be affected, and as Alston and Kent (2006) note, even when rural schools are staffed to requirements: “there are fewer experienced teachers to guide new graduates and beginning teachers” (p.192). Accordingly, the professional development of teachers in rural and remote areas becomes an associated area that requires significant attention (Moriarty & Gray, 2003). This places the national crisis in attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals to rural areas (HREOC, 1998) in

¹ Dorothea McKellar, “My country” (1908), http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/people_places/caergwrle/mycountry/index.html

close connection with the long-term effects of drought on rural communities. As the major employer of teachers in all Australian jurisdictions, state education departments have limited power to overcome these issues—although, as we go on to discuss, they remain a strong focus and responsibility for them.

Problems of Teacher Supply for Rural Schools

In both Australian and international literature, it is accepted that rural schools are essential for the sustainability of rural communities (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003), and that schools in rural communities experience more difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified staff than schools in metropolitan, coastal and large regional inland cities (Ballou & Podgursky, 1998; Gibson, 1994; Halsey, 2005; Martin, 1994; McEwan, 1999; Roberts, 2004; Sharplin, 2002). In Australia, for example, a study of school principals in one state, New South Wales (NSW) indicated that 54% of rural and remote schools had experienced teacher supply problems over the previous year, with 57% stating that the problem had got worse over that time (Halsey, 2005). A similar survey of NSW primary school principals found that 92% of respondents were experiencing difficulties in finding casual teachers (Vinson, 2002).

It is widely acknowledged that the nature and quality of the teachers who staff rural, regional, and remote schools impact the quality and equity of educational experiences for the people in these areas (Barley & Beesley, 2007; HREOC, 1998; Mills & Gale, 2003; Sharplin, 2002; Sher, 1991). A report by the NSW Public Education Council (2005) highlighted the link between staffing and quality outcomes, particularly in so-called hard to staff schools with a continuing history of staff turnover. This “staffing churn,” results in a perceived lack of commitment by schools to the communities they serve, often resulting in a distancing of school staff from the community. An unwillingness of students and their families to commit strongly to education often follows. This kind of vicious circle of decline and disengagement is characterized by the cry of “See you when you don’t come back!” (Simpson, 2007) from a young child in a remote outback school in northern NSW saying farewell to a group of visiting students who had travelled to their school for a pre-service orientation visit. Indeed, current supply and demand projections for teachers and other professionals suggest a continuing national shortfall in teachers for rural schools and communities (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 1999). If Australia is to increase its chances of primary, secondary, and tertiary rural industries competing in a global market, then an increased focus on improving the educational experiences and opportunities of rural communities and, further, on making

rural teaching an attractive and long-term career option is vital.

The “rural problem” for Australian schooling has troubled state governments across three centuries now, and history shows that the range of suggestions and solutions to what has become a perennial issue of attracting and retaining teachers for the bush have never had more than temporary success (Green & Reid, 2004; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003). Although governments agree that “the future of regional Australia is dependent upon an educated and skilled population,” there are significant barriers to the achievement of this goal “which not only restrict access to education and training in rural areas but which also deprive rural people of their basic human rights” (HREOC, 1999). The issue is made more difficult, bureaucratically, because of the complex nature of our understanding of the term rural in educational jurisdictions as large as those in Australia (where the state of NSW covers 801,428 square kilometers, for instance) and the need for researchers and stakeholders not to generalize “rural” across the specificities of place.

While the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has defined rural as including “open country and small settlements of less than 2,500 persons that are not in the vicinity of the densely populated suburban areas known as urban clusters” (Barley & Beesley, 2007, p. 2), there is no equivalent general definition available for Australian educational researchers, and the size and diversity of educational jurisdictions mean that a single definition may well be unhelpful. At the very least, we need to acknowledge that a one size fits all approach is inadequate for addressing the education issues of rural and remote schools (Letts, Novak, Gottschall, Green, & Meyenn, 2005; Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003). There are two distinct elements of the term rural as we use it here: one is the notion of rural as different from metropolitan; and the other is related to accessibility to services and remoteness. According to McGrail, Jones, Robinson, Rickard, Burley, and Drysdale (2005), “[t]here is no essential rural or metropolitan, but a concept of rural or metropolitan based on a continuum in regard to population numbers, accessibility of services, attitudes and values” (p. 22).

Most of the literature on rural education in Australia centers on the notion that things are more challenging “out there”—that practicing their profession is more of a challenge for teachers placed in schools in rural and remote locations. The literature points to several related issues: rural schools often cater to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have larger populations of Indigenous students, and are located in geographical and social landscapes of rural decline and drought. This results in populations that are often isolated, insular, with low academic expectations, lower test scores, and more social welfare issues. The rural

student population, it seems, suffers a disproportionate level of disadvantage. The issue of white flight from rural public schools (Patty, 2008) in towns with a significant Indigenous population is a growing problem related to larger historical issues of social and racial inequity, and adds another dimension to the need for well-prepared teachers in these schools.

Teacher Education: A Metro-centric View

The focus on the difficulty and complexity of rural education provision, quality teachers, and teacher professional development means that we need to place attention not just on the state employing body, but also on the process of initial teacher education as currently organized and offered by the university sector. Clearly, teacher education is implicated in the provision of quality teachers for rural and remote schools. As outlined earlier, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's national inquiry into rural and remote education emphasized that there was indeed a crisis for rural schools attracting new teachers. The inquiry linked the crisis with a lack of rural preparation in Australian universities, stating that "most teacher training does not equip new recruits with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching in rural and remote Australia" (HREOC, 2000, p. 43).

That this has been an ongoing problem for schooling in Australia is clear. Reid and Martin (2003) noted the complaints of new teachers in the 1930s sent to teach in rural NSW schools for which their training had not prepared them. Lake (1985) focused on the perceptions of newly appointed teachers in rural Western Australian schools, finding that their pre-service training had been inadequate for the challenges they faced. These teachers reportedly felt ill-prepared and were dissatisfied with the lack of attention in their training to multi-grade classrooms, rural communities, and expectations of the rural teacher. In another Australian state context, McSwan and Duck (1988) reported from their research with teachers in rural western Queensland. Like Lake, they found that their sample of teachers felt inadequately prepared for what they faced in rural schools. Fewer than one in five teachers had completed any subjects, activities, or experiences as part of their pre-service program that were relevant in these settings, and most felt gravely under-prepared (Boylan, 2004; Yarrow, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999).

Clarke, Imrich, and Wells (2003) confirmed these criticisms of rural pre-service teacher education programs, arguing that "the lack of training and support (time and resources) for teachers in multi-age settings is significantly affecting the quality of education of many students in these contexts" (p. 3). Gibson (1994), however, argued that the pervasive attitude in Australian policy documents

appears to assume no need for specialized training or selection practices for rural, remote, or isolated teaching personnel. Despite much research that identifies the need for specialized pre-service preparation that accommodates social and professional aspects in rural teaching contexts, the implementation of such programs by universities has been "sparse, haphazard, and in many cases, non-existent" (p. 76).

The continued lack of a rural focus in teacher preparation is supported by Halsey (2005) whose research highlighted that, for all practicum placements in Australian universities, only 22.7% are in non-metropolitan schools; and the majority of these are taken up by student teachers who already attend a regional campus or live in a rural area. The need for pre-service attention to the situation of initial teaching appointments, however, is becoming better recognized. Yarrow et al. (1999) argued that while many pre-service programs have only recently begun to address the "historically enduring and well-documented concern about lack of effective preparation of teachers to teach in rural schools" (p. 2), in the literature concerning teacher preparation for rural and remote teaching positions,

there were no examples where the need for some sort of specialized training was not advocated. Indeed, there seems to be almost universal recognition that pre-service teachers require better preparation for their likely early teaching positions. (p. 5)

Employer attention is increasingly directed, therefore, to pre-service teacher education, and in particular to metropolitan-based universities, asking how they might prepare urban-based student teachers to take up a rural practicum, with a longer-term view of later considering a rural career. One of the challenges facing urban student teachers, however, is the difficulty these student teachers often face in juggling work, study, and family commitments in order to take up a rural practice-teaching placement. This is increasingly noted by many as the single most important issue for the future of rural education (Halsey, 2005; Roberts, 2004).

A recent report on the size, scope, and issues of country teaching placement programs in teacher education in Australia (Halsey, 2005) has noted that to make a real difference to the way teachers are prepared as pre-service professionals, new and better ways of preparing for country teaching are needed. Two key policy recommendations from this study, directed at teacher education programs, are that:

- universities with teacher education programs should be strongly encouraged to develop policies to increase significantly the number of pre-service country teaching placements; and

- metropolitan universities and key stakeholders be strongly encouraged and provided with incentives to progressively and significantly increase the proportion of their teacher education cohort that participates in a country pre-service placement, and that beginning teachers' perceptions on teaching in rural or remote schools should be researched.

One of the ways that systems have responded to the need to recruit more teachers to rural locations is through the introduction of incentive schemes. Universities with a commitment to enhancing the preparation of students for rural schools have also taken up the challenge of providing support to students wishing to undertake a rural placement.

Rurality and Teacher Education-Rural Incentive Schemes

Various state-based incentives and university-based initiatives have tried to address this issue in innovative ways. Systemic programs such as the New South Wales scheme, "Beyond the Line," and the "Teaching in Regional and Rural Communities" program in South Australia have been designed by state departments of education to foster positive feelings about country life for city-based student teachers. Each of these initiatives provides a field trip for pre-service teachers to particular rural and remote locations. The hope is that these opportunities will help dispel some of the prior assumptions about rural communities held by city students. According to Halsey (2005), these programs have had positive responses, with students commenting that the experience has "opened their eyes" and has increased the numbers of student teachers who consider undertaking a rural practicum.

Whether they do so or not, however, is largely due to the issue of cost. Halsey's (2005) report revealed that the most significant factor preventing urban-based student teachers embarking on a rural practicum is the increased costs associated with spending time away from home. These costs include accommodation in the rural location, while maintaining rent commitments in the city; travel to and from their placement; loss of income from part-time work, as well as the possibility of losing their jobs and the extra costs associated in living in the country. For universities, there were also added travel and time costs associated with supervision by professors of students on a rural practicum and the inefficiencies of long-distance communication and liaison.

To counteract the costs associated with rural placements, most Australian state education departments have provided financial incentives for student teachers to encourage them to take up such an opportunity. In Victoria, for example, \$900 AUD is offered for final year students to participate in a rural practicum placement. Normally these placements

would be for a minimum three-week period. Although this is viewed as a positive initiative, many student teachers are still reluctant to take up such offers as the extended time away creates issues for work and family commitments. There is an urgent need, as Halsey (2005) argues, for new and better ways of dealing with the costs of an extended country placement.

There are three main problems with incentive schemes of this nature, however. One problematic issue with a subsidized rural practicum, in fact, may be the use of the practicum model itself. The practicum, as identified by Ryan, Toohey, and Hughes (1996), is the site where student teachers practice what they learn at university and focus on their teaching skills. In this model, student teachers are placed in a classroom, with a cooperating teacher. As Zeichner (1992) identified, though, this approach typically narrows the students' attention to the classroom. White (2003) argues that this model of practicum is based on a view of teaching as applied science: the student teacher's job is to apply, during practicum, what has been learned in university. Pre-service teachers spend the majority of their course time at the university learning the knowledge and skills that will qualify them to teach, and then engage in honing these skills during a set period of time in schools.

This model is problematic for rural schools in particular, where the "classroom focus" is at odds with a view of rural teaching that locates the teacher in the broader community. Prospective teachers for rural areas need to develop an understanding of the links between the classroom, the school, and the wider rural community—a different set of issues from those that the traditional model of a teaching practicum can provide. Like all teachers, rural teachers need to be acutely aware of and respond to community issues. Halsey (2005) argues that pre-service teachers need the opportunity to observe and experience the rural setting and to contemplate how to participate and respond in terms of pedagogy and as a member of a rural community. Rural teacher preparation models, in many ways, need to start from a "big picture" community focus and then move to the classroom, rather than maintaining a classroom focus only.

Another problem with the subsidized rural practicum provided in most Australian states is that the financial incentive offered is often only to those in their final year of study. At this stage of their course, students have usually experienced a number of schools and have already begun the process of deciding where they would like to teach. Unless a student is already thinking about a rural career, few would take this direction in their final year, preferring a school where they hope a job opportunity might arise. This belief is supported by Halsey (2005), who noted that one of the reasons pre-service teachers gave for not taking up a rural practicum was the perception that taking a country placement may mean they end up working there. Consideration needs to

be given to introducing the possibilities of country teaching far earlier in initial teacher education programs.

Finally, the current practicum model involves an extended period of time when students must physically relocate to a rural setting, usually alone and without the support by family or friends. Rural life is often perceived by urban students as isolated and the thought of this isolation, coupled with the prospect of struggling with the difficulties of the practicum itself (Ryan, Toohey, & Hughes, 1996), makes this a less than attractive proposal. The goal of any rural practicum experience should be to foster a sense of rurality, an understanding of rural communities and rural issues, the differences between rural communities, and the sorts of pedagogies that pay full regard to the specificities of place. The emphasis should be on developing a positive feeling about country life, with both its challenges and its possibilities for a lifelong teaching career.

How universities might work to foster such attitudes among pre-service teachers is the key question that we turn to in the remainder of the paper. In the following section, we provide an illustration of how an approach taken to provide a rural experience for city-based students, attempted to achieve this goal. By working with the notions of place-based and place-conscious pedagogies (Gruenewald, 2003), our analysis builds a conceptual framework that can guide future development in teacher education for rural schooling—in both metropolitan and regional settings.

Place-consciousness in the Teacher Education Agenda

Place-based pedagogies foreground the local and the known. They allow teachers to structure learning opportunities that are framed as meaningful and relevant to their students because they are connected to their own places, to people and to the popular cultures and concerns that engage them (Comber, Reid, & Nixon, 2007). Place-conscious pedagogies are more interested in developing and projecting awareness outward toward places (Gruenewald, 2003) beyond the immediate and the local, with a clear and articulated sense of the relationship of the local to the global, and of the social lifeworld to the natural environment.

As Page (2006) noted in her account of place pedagogies in teacher education, an understanding of the benefits of, and the capacity to manage, curriculum integration and multi-grade classes are key to successful preparation for teaching in small rural schools. She highlights the value of both place-based and place-conscious approaches in pre-service teacher education.

Our argument here is that such approaches build a place-conscious teacher subject—and that a teacher's consciousness of place in devising and planning learning experience brings about particular sorts of curriculum. As teachers come to know, and know about, a particular rural place, and come to understand its relationships to, and with

other places, they are developing knowledge, sensitivities, awareness, skills, attitudes, and abilities that will allow them to feel more at home and more powerful in a rural setting.

Pre-service teachers who have experienced life and work in a rural setting know what it is like to perform teaching, and be a teacher in a rural school because they have participated in rural classrooms, and lived in rural communities. They are not surprised, offended, or angered by the glare of the public interest in their movements; they understand this, as they understand that a child absent during harvest or shearing time may be working at home, rather than simply missing school, and they can plan their teaching to accommodate this. They are able to appreciate and notice small changes in the landscape, the sky, or the birds that may be imperceptible to those who do not know the place, or the meanings of these phenomena.

More importantly for teacher education, though, they are empowered, by understanding place differently, to see beyond the surface of educational deficit and disadvantage that can lead to lowered expectations for the learning and achievement of the children in schools that are characterized predominantly by their spatial and geographic location (Lauricella, 2005). As the work of Johnson, Finn, and Lewis (2005) highlights, getting to know a place often involves seeing, and responding to the people in it, differently.

In the next section, we describe a program devised for urban student teachers at Deakin University city campus. As documented by White (2006; 2007), the program is part of systematic study into teacher education practice that aims to enhance graduate take-up of rural teaching appointments through a direct concern with place conscious curriculum processes.

A Rural Experience for City-based Student Teachers

Conceived as a full action research cycle in the model outlined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1991), the rural experience program was influenced by the notion of teachers as “space invaders” (Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003, p.164). Space invaders is a term used to describe the possibility of being able to move across the boundaries of urban and rural locations to better understand the needs of either without necessarily being positioned in an either/or setting. The hypothesis of the study is that a strong consciousness of the specificities of different places, and reflective consideration of pedagogical approaches that can build on these across locations, will enable pre-service teachers to more confidently move and relate successfully in a wider range of school locations.

In 2005 and 2006, a group of 30 student teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching program, elected to work with a rural school on a program we identify here as the “Apple” experience. Apple Primary School (a pseudonym), is located in the Colac-Otway ranges in southwest Victoria, two and a

half hours from Melbourne where the students who studied in this program lived. Apple is a town with a population of fewer than 50, with the majority of the children travelling to school by bus from surrounding dairy farms or other small towns in the area. Over the past couple of years, the school has sustained an enrollment of approximately 40 children.

The Apple experience involved 40 student teachers of a cohort of 160, who chose this particular school program from six school choices—all the others being metropolitan schools. When asked why they had signed up for the experience, most said that they were interested in knowing more about country teaching even though they had little experience of rural life. Some of the students who selected the experience were international students from Canada, and they said that this was also an opportunity to find out more about Australia.

Our description and reflection on the Apple experience allow us to highlight three key issues for the sort of teacher education that will act to produce a sense of place-consciousness among beginning teachers, and support them to understand and relate to a rural or remote community in a productive and sustaining manner. Drawing on the concepts of social “funds of knowledge” (Mercado & Moll, 1997) that can be invested in and built upon by learners; on the understanding of the “multiple learning spaces” (White, 2003) that characterize pre-service teaching in any community setting; and on the developing work that focuses on knowledge producing teams (Bigum, 2002), we review the Apple experience to illustrate how it worked to produce a consciousness of that one particular place in a way that opened up, rather than closing down student teachers’ awareness and aptitude for teaching in other rural places. We draw also, here, on the work of teacher education researchers working with a place-conscious focus in urban schools in the United States which have a similarly hard to staff status (Johnson, Finn, & Lewis, 2005). Importantly, though, while that work refers to difficult inner-urban schools, with reputations for disadvantage and deficiency, the efforts of teacher educators to ensure pre-service teachers *get to know the place* where they are placed as an integral part of their practicum, have been just as successful in changing the attitudes toward the schools and students in these schools (Lauricella, 2005).

The Apple experience involved different opportunities for the city-based student teachers to work with the Apple Primary School children. One way was through a field trip which offered a range of learning opportunities about the lives of rural children. One of the highlights was a trip to a local dairy owned by one of the families from the school. On arrival at the dairy, three of the Apple children greeted the students and gave them a tour of the farm. The children’s grandfather, “Pop,” also talked to the students about the work on the farm and the particular chores expected of the

children considering their various ages both before and after school. Students had the opportunities for milking the cows and feeding the calves and asking questions of the three generations of dairy farmers about their lives. The dairy visit was designed to allow students to witness children outside the classroom participating in their everyday worlds.

Funds of Knowledge

One of the challenges in enabling city-based student teachers to understand rural children’s lives is to position student teachers as co-researchers in documenting the knowledge and social practices that constitute the children’s homes and lives (Mercado & Moll, 1997). The geographic distance between the university and Apple town meant that visiting the children’s homes and communities was problematic. To deal with this, student teachers and children were buddied up prior to the school visit, so that all children had at least one buddy. Children, sometimes with the assistance of their teacher, wrote an introductory letter to their buddy talking about their families, interests, pets, etc. Student teachers then replied (letters were sent to the school’s address) to be handed out to the children. A two-day field trip to the school and community was an integral part of the experience. Student teachers stayed in the closest town that offered relatively cheap accommodation, many students choosing to travel and stay together.

By introducing themselves, and their place, to the student teachers, the school students were able to make clear the things that they saw as important to them in their everyday lives at Apple. This allowed the student teachers to “cut through the small talk” when they visited the community, to ask questions about what the children had written, and to find out much more about life and living in that small place. The school children, positioned as experts in these exchanges, were able to speak confidently and eloquently about what they knew, thus dispelling the urban myths about the limitations and deficiencies of rural schools and schooling.

Students commented on how they had never considered the vast array of experiences and knowledge that children bring with them to school, and that teachers often fail to acknowledge or tap into. Although relatively brief in time, this experience gave the students an insight into the lifeworlds of these particular children and made them consider the importance of finding out about the funds of knowledge children have accumulated outside of the classroom. The field trip also involved the student teachers meeting their buddies and the children showing them around their school and their classroom work. The teachers noted that, for many of the children, this initiative was the first time they had communicated with an audience outside of their immediate family and school, let alone a group from another country.

As noted above, some of the students who had chosen the Apple experience were Canadian. It was interesting to

watch the exchange of cultural comparisons between rural Australia and rural Canada. When the children began their day with the Australian national anthem, the Canadian cohort asked if they could sing in turn their national anthem. Student teachers sang it in both French and English, leading to further discussions between children, teachers, and student teachers.

A Multiple Learning Space Approach

In a similar way, the idea of a multiple learning space approach (White, 2003) acknowledges the many spaces a teacher works in, and seeks to value each space as part of teacher preparation, rather than privileging the classroom space. In applying this notion to the Apple experience, it is clear that the student teachers were expected to engage with a range of learning spaces from university lectures, workshops, school classrooms, local parks, cultural institutions, farms, rural community, on-line forum, and e-mail communications with the school students. The pre-service teachers were able to use the school's website, which provided a virtual tour and visuals of the school classrooms, playgrounds, and local areas, to initiate and respond to posted on-line questions, and they used the internet to find out about the geographic, historical, social, and cultural background of the community.

This meant that the real-life experience of visiting, seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and interacting with the place they had experienced virtually was a heightened experience for the student teachers. While it was not a lengthy engagement and cannot equate with the experience of having lived there for a sustained period of time, the intensity of the interactions with the people and the place does ensure that it produces an effect in terms of understanding and consciousness. It is important to note here that the Apple experience required the city-based teacher educator to not just leave the spaces provided for the students to work in and learn from to chance—the work of the teacher educator in these multiple learning spaces is to ensure continuity and support, so that prejudices are contested by the experience rather than reinforced. As we go on to argue, the curriculum of place-conscious education is always carefully constructed.

Knowledge Producing Teams

The Apple experience involved the pre-service teachers working in knowledge producing (Bigum, 2002) teams whereby the children, teachers, teacher educators, and the pre-service teachers themselves worked collaboratively in small groups with a mutually negotiated project. This had been set up by the teacher educator at the start of the semester, in conjunction with the Apple teachers and principal. Their task was to develop a set of multi-age resources around the theme of the environment, as this was the school's focus. Student teachers prepared the resources prior to meeting the

children and then worked with them during the field trip. Student teachers, in teams, used their prepared resources in multi-age groupings (Kindergarten; Grades 1, 2, and 3; and Grades 4, 5, and 6) and later reflected with colleagues and the teacher educator on what they had learned. In Australia, primary schools cater for children aged five years to twelve years, and in most rural small schools such as Apple Primary, there may only be one child from each age group and year level in a school at a given time, thus the need for multi-age classes.

As Yarrow, Herschell, and Millwater (1999) found, there is a clear deficiency in teacher preparation for rural schools in terms of the pedagogy of multi-age classes and multi-age group strategies. This experience enabled students to learn about catering for individual needs and how children of different ages and abilities can support the learning of each other. The teams also became a powerful means of support for each other. Unlike an isolated rural practicum model, student teachers worked cooperatively with each other and the school's teachers, building social relationships and drawing from each other's expertise. The Apple school's teachers found this a valuable aspect of the program and noted that the large cohort of students bringing new ideas, various skills and practical resources had enabled them to reflect on ways they could incorporate this new knowledge into their own classroom teaching.

Social capital for rural communities is very important. The Apple experience fostered social networks and information exchange that have continued past the semester, with one of the students returning, over a year later, to take up a position in the Colac-Otway region. Halsey (2005) reported that rural communities benefit from pre-service country teaching placements because they bring expertise and knowledge which are not available locally into communities and schools. This experience broadened the opportunities for teachers to work with a far greater number of student teachers and the teacher educator over an extended period of time, and so, even though the time spent in the school was short, the networks created were sustained, rich, and mutually beneficial.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued for the need for a greater awareness in teacher education of the importance of understanding place. On the basis of teacher education practice that encourages student teachers to experience and interact with the material and social dimensions of a particular rural teaching setting, we suggest that attention to place could be a key means of expanding the consciousness of student teachers about the *significance* of place, and its relationships to other places and social practices. Focused attention to the relationships in and between places can better prepare pre-service teachers in rural and metropolitan

teacher education settings to enter and work in places that are different from their own.

Our description and analysis of the Apple experience, undertaken as part of initial teacher education in one metropolitan university, strongly suggest that there may well be a connection to be made between the nature of teacher education curriculum and the willingness of new teachers to take up positions in rural locations. In this way, we suggest, teacher education can help the nation to resist the effects of rural decline (whether this is brought about by the effects of drought, as is currently the case in Australia) and thereby help to sustain healthy rural communities and economies. While rural economy and teacher education might not be usual bedfellows, we have strongly argued throughout this paper the need for them to be carefully and purposefully linked, and the potential that place-conscious pedagogical practices in teacher education have, for successfully establishing a connection to and understanding of the significance of place.

Rural children deserve high-quality teachers who understand the importance of place, value their lifeworlds, and build appropriate teaching and learning opportunities. The experience that produces a cry of “See you when you don’t come back” (Simpson, 2007) suggests a view of pre-service teachers—and pre-service teacher education—that we do not wish rural children to perpetuate. Likewise, teachers who, over their careers, take up a rural placement need to be prepared for the unique features of living and working in a rural community—in particular, the need, as articulated in this paper, to be acutely aware of and respond to community issues and the potential of place-based pedagogies for expanding the repertoires of practice available to children in rural schools (Page, 2006).

We have argued that the preparation of such teachers is not the sole responsibility of regional universities. As Green and Reid (2004) have noted, “[t]he general reform of teacher education needs to take into account the continuing, albeit changing, significance of the relationship between teacher education and rural schooling” (p. 262). Although metropolitan universities and the students who attend them might find it more difficult to experience rural schools, there are sustainable and creative approaches to building an understanding of rural pedagogy, as outlined here, that can be further explored. Attention to place as an integral part of teacher education curriculum, for instance, will support the development of place-consciousness, in Gruenewald’s (2003) sense. Lastly, we have outlined some current problems with the status quo of teacher education and rural incentives, and hope that future research and funding can be more efficiently directed at better investing in teacher preparation for strong and productive, “drought resistant” rural communities.

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