Chapter 8
Recruiting, Retaining and Supporting Early Career Teachers for Rural Schools

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Abstract The staff of Australia's rural schools include many early career teachers who are keen to begin their careers in geographically diverse communities. Despite often high levels of motivation to take up a rural position and many well-funded government incentives to do so, recruiting and retaining teachers remains a challenge across Australia. Against this backdrop this chapter explores the key question: How can we better prepare and support the next generation of teachers for our rural schools? The chapter firstly explores the perennial issues of rural staffing and then critically examines a range of incentives for both pre-service and in-service teachers to attract them to rural schools and communities. One of the reasons incentives appear to be failing could be 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. To date, teacher education providers and schools have put little effort into changing their preparation and induction models. The chapter concludes with possibilities for a 'system' change to address the rural staffing crisis and raises the need for a new transformative approach to link more meaningfully initial teacher education, professional experience *in and with* communities and in-service professional learning (including teachers and teacher educators).

8.1 Introduction

Australian rural education studies continue to show that the further away from a capital city a school is located, the more likely it is to be 'harder to staff' (Kenny et al. 2016). Australia's rural schools are also more likely to be staffed by early career teachers who, despite a range of financial incentives designed to recruit them, do not appear to stay long (Roberts 2004; Mayer et al. 2014); report they have had little preparation for their rural context (White and Reid 2008; White and Kline

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2012); are more likely to teach outside their field (Hobbs 2013); and suffer greater rates of burnout (Sharplin et al. 2011). All of these things can have a devastating effect on their personal lives, as well as on the students they teach (O'Brien et al. 2008; Reid et al. 2010). Against this backdrop, this chapter explores the key question: How can we better prepare and support the next generation of teachers for our rural schools?

The chapter begins by revisiting some of the broader perennial issues of staffing rural schools and critically examines the current university and jurisdictional incentives on offer to address them. Discussion then turns to the complexity of defining 'rurality' and the staffing churn itself as possible reasons for the perpetuation of the problems. In short, I argue that the current 'status quo' unwittingly reinforces, rather than resolves, the current rural staffing issues. The constant positioning of rural schools as deficit, as opposed to different, in policy reforms appears to work against the success of future reforms. The chapter then turns to the growing socio-spatial (Soja 1980) education literature and to a 'rural social space' (Reid et al. 2010) model to better understand rural staffing needs, offering new possibilities for the preparation of novice teachers.

A particular focus is given to the importance of initial teacher education widening the perspective of being 'classroom-ready' (see Craven et al. 2014) to encompass the notion of becoming 'community-ready' (White 2010). I have coined this term to better frame the preparation of teachers to understand and value the specific place in which they work and to value their students' 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al. 2005). In this way 'community' is posed as a conceptual framework for teacher educators (those who teach the teachers) to use. I argue that teacher educators are key to solving rural staffing issues, and initial teacher education providers need to urgently address the notion of place in their curriculum and professional experience renewal.

The chapter concludes with possibilities for a 'system' change to address the rural staffing crisis and provides new transformative ways to link more meaningfully initial teacher education, professional experience *in and with* community and in-service professional learning (including teachers and teacher educators).

8.2 The Perennial Issues of Staffing Rural Schools

One cause of perceived educational disadvantage is geographic location and, in the Australian context, this often equates to those locations inland and further from the 'metropolis', or defined geographically by terms such as regional, rural or remote. Currently, these terms encompass a significant land mass across the continent which is home to approximately one-third of the Australian population. Contrary to popular myths of decline, this population is either stable or growing (albeit not in all regions). According to Hugo et al. (2013) the period from 2006 to 2011 saw the largest population growth in Australian history and, while 'megacities' such as Sydney and Melbourne are continuing to grow rapidly, the mining boom,

in-migration and immigration have also caused the number people moving into 'regional' Australia to increase. According to the Regional University Network website (2017), this trend will only increase with the Australian Bureau of Statistics projecting that the population outside capital cities will grow by 26% between 2007 and 2026. With this projected increase in students and their families in rural and regional areas, the question now to be asked is: How will Australia best staff our rural schools and counter the notion of educational disadvantage?

Historically, it is new graduates who have staffed rural and remote schools (Sharplin 2002) and this continues to be the case, as Capeness (2015) notes:

> The 2013 Staff in Australia's Schools survey reports that early career teachers (ECTs) make up 22% of the primary teacher workforce, but nearly half of these (45%) work in remote schools. ECTs make up 18% of the secondary teacher workforce and nearly a third of these (30%) are based in remote locations (McKenzie et al. 2014). (p. 95)

Like many early career teachers, rural novice teachers begin with 'idealistic' visions, positive motivations to teach (Watt and Richardson 2008) and a desire to be good teachers. A recent 'spotlight' report by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2016) into the attrition and retention of beginning teachers revealed a lack of statistical evidence of the attrition rates of beginning teachers, stating: 'Current estimates of attrition of early career teachers in Australia vary widely' (p. 3). On the other hand, qualitative studies (albeit small scale and more locally based) reveal that teacher attrition in Australia's rural schools is high (Trinidad et al. 2012). Such studies illuminate factors such as geographic isolation from family and friends, inadequate access to services and recreational facilities, inadequate preparation for multistage classrooms, inadequate pre-service preparation for place and community, inadequate housing, professional isolation and extreme weather conditions to account for much of the turnover of the often young and inexperienced teachers that find their way into rural schools (see, e.g. Page (2006), White and Reid (2008), Sullivan and Johnson (2012) and Kline and Walker-Gibbs (2015)).

Some studies indeed reveal 'horror' stories from novice teachers (see, e.g. Sharplin (2002) and Sharplin et al. (2011)) who take up a rural position only to leave within the first couple of days or months of teaching *or*, as equally important, from their students and their families on the impact of constant attrition (see, e.g. Mills and Gale (2003)). As Roberts and Green (2013) note about their historical study, 'Since the advent of schooling in Australia, rural areas have generally achieved educational outcomes below their metropolitan counterparts' (p. 765).

This rural staffing 'churn' or rapid turnover is not only limited to early career teachers but can also refer to new principals, which exacerbates the teacher attrition. The lack of a stable, supportive leadership environment can negatively impact on the induction and mentoring that beginning teachers require. Capeness (2015) explains:

> Further complications can occur through the high turnover of early career principals in rural schools on their own career trajectories. This can impact on provisionally registered teachers in these schools not having the support of stable school leadership to move to full registration in similar ways and timeframes to their colleagues based in larger, urban contexts. (p. 96)

The response 'See you when you don't come back', which a young Aboriginal rural girl called out to a group of pre-service teachers (as reported in Simpson 2007), reflects the *lived* experience, even if quantitative data at this stage might not yet reveal the specific numbers of teachers leaving and their statistical impact. From all accounts, the issues described above continue unabated.

In the next section, I provide a critical analysis that explores the various government incentives for early career teachers to go to rural schools to address the 'churn'. Three target audiences are discussed: the first incentives focus on attracting graduate teachers, the second on pre-service teachers and the third are fast-track incentive models. I argue that the incentives *themselves* (not the people who are attracted to them) may be at best unwittingly contributing to the very issues they seek to resolve because the incentives largely sit outside of teacher preparation and thus fail to transform teacher education at the university or school level. This is itself an area for further research and investigation, as the NSW Department of Education in *Rural and remote education: A blueprint for action* (2014) notes: 'While there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of incentive schemes, encouraging and retaining the right teachers in rural schools would clearly benefit rural students' (p. 4).

8.3 An Examination of Incentives to Address the Rural Staffing Churn: Perpetuating the Status Quo?

The reason new graduate teachers tend to 'go bush or outback' (in colloquial Australian terms) is typically to seek full-time employment in the beginning phases of their teaching career, with some taking up government financial incentives (as provided by universities or the states and territories) to do so, but without necessarily receiving the appropriate induction and mentoring support required (Halsey 2006; Roberts 2004; Mayer et al. 2014). The truth of the myth that 'It is easier to get a permanent job in a rural location' is also coming into question with recent studies indicating ongoing employment conditions for beginning teachers generally, and in rural areas in particular, are not as favourable as predicted. Many early career teachers remain for long periods on short-term contracts or are placed in uncertain sessional or temporary positions. This lack of certainty in relation to their employment conditions leads to lower perceptions of their own preparation and effectiveness (Mayer et al. 2014, 2017).

8.3.1 In-Service Incentives

For some graduates, their motivations for seeking a rural placement are not only the hope for a permanent position but also the 'reward' of attracting 'points' (in some states of Australia) for 'country service', which can be accumulated to secure a position in a school of their choosing, usually in a city or coastal setting

(Hickling-Hudson and Ahlquist 2004; Reid et al. 2010). This strategy has historical roots: Boylan and King (1991) describe three-year scholarships for 'bonded' teachers who take up a rural position. The New South Wales Department of Education website teach. NSW continues this strategy, stating:

> Temporary teaching continuously in a rural or remote NSW public school for two years can also lead to appointment to a permanent position under section 7.2 of the Rural and Remote Education: A blueprint for action (2013) to attract and retain teachers in six-point and eight-point incentive schools.

While the incentive was established to adequately staff rural schools, this practice can have a profound negative effect on rural students who might believe that their teachers do not care about them. While I am not seeking to criticise those beginning teachers keen to experience a rural school or further their career, for rural students knowing beginning teachers are there only in preparation to leave could exacerbate their 'educational disadvantage'. Reid et al. (2010) explain:

> There is a generalised expectation among many rural children and their families that teachers lack interest in their education. This viewpoint has developed from the typically rapid turnover of staff in many rural schools. When students believe that their teachers have never been interested in teaching in their town, they are likely to become disheartened, discouraged and uninterested in learning from them. (p. 266)

Another recruitment incentive targeting early career teachers offered by NSW is a trial staffing period. The incentive is described in *Rural and remote education: A blueprint for action*: 'Newly appointed teachers and school leaders in rural and remote schools may be offered a 10-week trial before their permanent appointment is confirmed' (NSW Department of Education 2014, p. 13). While this incentive could be perceived as a positive way to enable a graduate teacher to 'trial a rural school and see' whether they like the place and community, it risks staffing instability for the students, further highlighting what Reid et al. (2010) explain above as an unintended consequence of such practices. The 10-week trial period could also place novice teachers who are keen to get the job in a compromising position of performativity while they wait for their readiness to teach to be assessed by the principal. This places the teachers in the difficult position of being more concerned about employment than the students they teach. The practice could also dissuade graduates from trialling new, innovative approaches learnt at university for fear that they may not best fit within the established practices of the school. Such trial practices do not translate into a stable learning environment for students, who should be the main priority.

8.3.2 Pre-Service Incentives

To further address the rural staffing shortage, some government incentives have also been initiated at the pre-service level, either as a longer-term, targeted recruitment strategy or as a subsidised 'rural' practicum as part of a university qualification. Longer-term incentive recruitment models include, as an example, the Victorian

model where there are financial incentives of up to $11,000 available to final-year pre-service teachers and new teacher graduates through the Teaching Scholarship Scheme to take up employment in 'priority teaching vacancies', in what are sometimes referred to as 'harder-to-staff' schools, when they finish their degree.

In New South Wales the 'teach.Rural' website provides information about generous scholarships for pre-service teachers who commit to teaching in a rural location while completing their study. Financial incentives ($6000 per year) are provided, with a guaranteed permanent position and $5000 appointment allowance in a rural placement at the end of their degree. To avoid paying back the scholarship, pre-service teachers must stay for a minimum of 3 years.

Interestingly, the scholarship recipients that the website promotes are from a small rural town themselves and both are graduates of the University of Newcastle (a regional university). Arguably, the funds could thus be viewed as providing 'country' students with the resources to study away from home and return to a rural location on completion of their degree. Given the increased difficulties many rural students experience in accessing higher education (Alston and Kent 2003), scholarships for this purpose alone are highly commendable. However, the scholarships are aimed at *staffing* rural schools not supporting rural students to study, as the website notes: 'Demand for teachers in many rural and remote locations throughout NSW is high. To improve your employment prospects and fast-track your career as a teacher in NSW public schools, consider teaching in rural or remote locations.'

The rationale behind marketing two rural students (Kimberley and Sam) appears to be that rural beginning teachers will stay rural. This thinking however is somewhat flawed (as will be further discussed later in the chapter) as it assumes *all* rural locations are the same. The teach.Rural website provides a long list of schools that are deemed 'rural' from the New England region in the north of NSW, to the west and then to the Riverina in the south. The diversity of towns included under the banner of 'rural' where the students could be placed illustrates the vast differences in 'rurality'.

The incentive program does not appear to influence or require *any* differences in the teacher education preparation for these students, merely the commitment by the student to stay at the completion of a degree. The questions become, is it only the financial reward and the familiarity of a rural place that will prepare and retain beginning rural teachers? Does teacher education have no role to play in preparing teachers for the diverse range of locations they might experience? What role can teacher education play in the preparation of a teacher for their whole career?

In many other states, incentives are also focused on supporting subsidised 'practicum' or professional experiences. In Tasmania, for example, the Professional Experience in Isolated and Rural Schools (PEIRS) program encourages pre-service teachers to undertake teaching experience in participating rural and isolated schools by providing support for accommodation and travel. In Western Australia, the Rural Teaching Practicum Program offers pre-service teachers a practicum (normally over a block of time) in a rural/remote school. Practicum students can apply for a travel allowance and living subsidy to assist with travel and living expenses while working in a rural or remote location. Queensland maintains the 'Beyond the Range' pro-

gram, supplying grants of up to $2000 to enable pre-service teachers to broaden their skills, professional teaching experience and employment opportunities in eligible rural or remote Queensland locations. While these schemes are generous, the costs of relocating to complete a rural practicum are much higher (Halsey 2006).

The majority of these incentives, while making the resources available for pre-service teachers to experience a rural community, do not require any changes in the ways in which pre-service teachers are prepared in their curriculum studies for rural communities. While perhaps they are a step in the right direction, these types of incentives do not require universities to do any more than assist in either marketing the opportunity of a subsidised rural practicum or organising the practicum. In a study of teacher educators (White and Kline 2012) knowledge of such incentives was very limited, let alone any involvement in support for such placements. To take a cynical view, these subsidised practicum experiences relieve universities of any responsibility to prepare their students for a rural career by transferring the onus to the student. Research shows that, while a rural placement can provide a positive experience, it is also costly to the student and can reinforce negative stereotypes of rural communities and students (Sharplin 2002; Halsey 2006).

8.3.3 'Fast-Track' Incentives

A different form of incentive for staffing rural schools has entered the Australian context in more recent years in the form of encouraging alternative pathways into teaching, sometimes referred to as a 'fast track'. Teach for Australia (TFA) is such an example modelled on the 'Teach for All' franchise that includes England's Teach First and the US Teach for America models. In these two countries, the schools deemed harder to staff include low socio-economic and high cultural and linguistic diversity schools often located in high-density urban populations. As an example, Teach for America graduates have staffed many Louisiana schools since the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. The Teach for America Greater New Orleans–Louisiana Delta website documents their growth:

> Teach For America – Greater New Orleans began with just 45 corps members in 1990, and now has a corps of over 300 serving the parishes of Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard. Additionally, there are over 1,000 alumni living in the region. Today, TFA corps members and alumni comprise a full 20 percent of the New Orleans teaching force, and over 50 alumni serve as leaders at the school or school systems level. (Teach for America 2017)

This particular model takes an interesting twist on the issue of staffing 'harder-to-staff' schools by not only making it compulsory for those newest to the profession to start their training to teach in a disadvantaged or harder-to-staff school but also placing the responsibility to work against such disadvantage on inexperienced shoulders. A third and even potentially risky requirement is that the trainee, or 'associate' as they are known, is given full pay and responsibility (the same as a fully qualified teacher) for teaching students, but has not yet completed a teaching

degree when they commence their teaching position. In Australia, the TFA model promotes new recruits who are positioned as key to addressing not only the rural teaching shortage but also 'rural disadvantage'. This incentive program therefore positions beginning 'trainee' teachers as key to unlocking entrenched and widening social inequality. As Skourdoumbis (2012), an Australian academic, notes:

> There is nothing inherently new in policymakers seeking to address teacher-supply issues in Australia. The utilization though, of a supply of novice and beginner teachers specifically in order to grapple and deal with educational disadvantage in Australian secondary schools, is relatively new. (p. 306)

Unlike the teach.Rural scholarship students, to address such social inequality, TFA associates are only required to stay at the school for two years. The TFA website touts that the skills and knowledge to be gained include 'problem solving', 'leadership' and 'people management'. These terms are not often named as core to preservice teachers' learning. They are usually deemed skills 'for life' and viewed as transferable to other more lucrative professions or positions usually outside of teaching in a school, although often in an education-related field. In essence, this language and enticement works in much the same way as 'country points' except, instead of a 'better' school, the pathway is paved to a 'better paying job'. The incentive appears to frame the 'reward' as the entry into a higher paid profession than teaching, using the classroom experience to provide a broad knowledge base and to leverage the experience of teaching in a harder-to-staff school to in turn be placed in a position of leadership to influence education policy. The incentive appears to be an employment route into industry, business and philanthropy (which in turn often fund the same types of incentive programs).

The contribution of the various country or indeed global TFA schemes to solving social inequality is difficult to measure. American leading scholar Linda Darling Hammond has however published findings on an American comparative study between TFA associate and beginning teachers:

> In a series of regression analyses looking at 4th and 5th grade student achievement gains on six different reading and mathematics tests over a six-year period, we find that certified teachers consistently produce stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers. These findings hold for TFA recruits as well as others. Controlling for teacher experience, degrees, and student characteristics, uncertified TFA recruits are less effective than certified teachers, and perform about as well as other uncertified teachers. TFA recruits who become certified after 2 or 3 years do about as well as other certified teachers in supporting student achievement gains; however, nearly all of them leave within three years. Teachers' effectiveness appears strongly related to the preparation they have received for teaching. (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005, p. 2)

Again, I do not wish to criticise those who choose this particular incentive as, like all beginning teachers, they are well intentioned. It is difficult however to rationalise an incentive model that is based in essence on the least prepared 'trainee' teachers (who are not yet qualified) being deliberately positioned to teach those who are deemed most disadvantaged. To turn social inequality around in an isolated and limited timeframe, in schools where large numbers of novice teachers and principals are already more likely to be commencing, should not be a job for our most inexperienced teachers.

As well intended as such incentives might be, further investigation is required into their cost, impact and fit for purpose. At present these incentives have highlighted individual stories of success but at best they do not truly appear to be addressing the rural teaching shortage. At worst they might be unwittingly fuelling the continuing disadvantage suffered by rural students. In the next section of the chapter, I will explore the reasons for this and alternatives to such incentives with a focus on transformation of the system.

8.4 Examining the Notions of 'Rurality' and Place: Unlocking the Challenges Using a Socio-spatial Framework

Many of the incentives discussed above name and categorise certain schools as 'priority', or use terms (sometimes interchangeably) such as rural, regional or remote to mean 'hard to staff'. Unfortunately in the discourses of staffing rural schools, these terms are often synonymous with 'deficit' and disadvantage. An example is the marketing of one incentive as 'making a difference'. The 'naming' of schools in this way, as Reid et al. (2010) argue, can contribute even further to social inequality:

> In the social world of education and schooling, rural schools and communities are clearly both 'insulted' and 'officially named' by the metropolitan mainstream as deficient, backward and socially undesirable. As teachers name the places where they are reluctant to work, but where it is 'easy' to get a job, these places are effectively denigrated as undesirable, and officially classified as 'hard to staff' by the state apparatus. This is an example of what Bourdieu sees as symbolic violence that 'insults' professionals in rural locations, and effectively (re)produces the idea that those who work in city schools and professions are somehow 'better' than those who 'can't'. (p. 265)

Indeed, in writing this chapter I am aware of my own use of the terminology of rural staffing as 'an issue' and 'problem' as in itself potentially contributing to what I hope to challenge. Defining and naming places as regional, rural and remote is clearly fraught. What do these terms really mean in terms of staffing needs? One way of categorising place as 'rural' or 'remote' as used by social services and governments is in terms of the road distance travelled from services, and this is the standard method to define terms such as 'remoteness' for statistical purposes in Australia, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2011) website. While I understand that 'accessibility' might be an important element, defining places as either 'city' or 'country', or rural, regional or remote, can be overly simplistic and unhelpful in staffing terms. This is often due to the very nature of different people's perceptions and subjectivities (real and imaginary) of what counts as 'rural' (see Sharplin 2002). In short, what is viewed as rural by one person might be viewed as outer-urban or even remote by another, and culturally such terms are viewed very differently within and across each state and territory.

Western Australians, for example, often mock the notion of rural staffing issues in Victoria, and yet, as the department incentives highlight, they clearly experience such shortages. Interestingly, many Victorians do not perceive that any part of their state could be deemed 'remote', thinking such a term refers to the 'red dirt central part' of Australia. In reality, the accessibility index rates South-East Gippsland in Victoria as 'highly remote'. Tasmania, on the other hand, while viewed as a small, compact state by the majority of the mainland population, suffers high levels of inaccessibility and remoteness although places might appear geographically close to a major town, thereby skewing the remoteness factor. For Tasmanian 'rural' students who seek to complete their Year 11 and 12 studies by travelling to 'a larger town', accessibility becomes less about distance and more about transport and housing, with a lack of public transport and options for students to study away from home discouraging them from completing their post-compulsory schooling.

8.4.1 Socio-spatial Terms to Understand Better Rural Staffing Needs

As the global population grows and shifts occur, new 'socio-spatial' terms are emerging to help us better understand the nuances of notions of 'place and space'. While such understanding began with 'urban' literature there is now a growing focus on rural places. Understanding the significance of such terms in relation to 'rurality' and viewing rural places as different *not* deficit is increasing. As Pratt (1989) explained:

> Just as there are 'urban areas', 'residential areas', 'suburban areas' and a host of other types of area, so too can we define 'rural areas' according to their socio-spatial characteristics. This way of defining the rural concentrates upon that which is observable and measurable and, hence, leads to descriptive definitions. Such empiricism accepts that the rural exists and concerns itself with the correct selection of parameters with which to define it. (cited in Halfacree 1993, p. 23)

Hugo et al. (2013) in their policy brief titled *Internal migration and regional Australia* introduce more descriptive terms to better understand 'regional and rural' places. They introduce the term 'peri-metropolitan' (p. 2) to mean places which are near the margins or in commuting distance of the capital cities. Interestingly, with increases in roads and transport in New South Wales, the town of Bathurst (named as a rural place for teach.Rural scholarships) is arguably becoming peri-metropolitan with people commuting from Bathurst to Sydney (now a 2-hour train trip or drive).

Further clarifications are also occurring, with greater specificity given to naming places such as 'older mining towns' and 'new mining towns'. In keeping with a greater understanding of 'place' beyond dualistic 'country–city' geographical terms, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) website has recently moved away from defining a place as either metropolitan or non-metropolitan to a more nuanced 'socio-economic' measure, thus paving the way for a more stable policy platform on

which decisions can be based. This greater understanding of the differences of place can offer much to the preparation of beginning teachers for rural communities, explored further in the next section.

8.5   A Spatial Turn for the Preparation of Beginning (Rural) Teachers

As Somerville and Rennie (2012) note, despite the spatial turn that has influenced social policy, research and scholarship, the new conceptual framework for understanding 'place' has been relatively absent in research in education. Clouding the issues, too often in the education literature rural areas have been homogenised (Roberts and Green 2013). This is evident in the example of the teach.Rural list of a broad range of very diverse places all named under the same umbrella of 'rural' hard-to-staff schools. It is also evident in research in rural education and in the ways in which courses and programs are delivered for pre-service teachers. Clearly, remote, rural and regional communities all have different contexts and potentially different factors impacting on their students; therefore studies that have examined 'rural Australia' as 'one' often have oversimplified the concept of rural and not necessarily taken into account the uniqueness of each place.

This lack of socio-spatial awareness in relation to education has been steadily changing, with the past decade witnessing a greater Australian research focus on the nuances of place in relation to understanding education and teacher education (see for example Brennan 2005; Halsey 2006; White and Reid 2008; Reid et al. 2010; Somerville and Rennie 2012; Cuervo 2012; Roberts and Green 2013; Green 2015; Kline and Walker-Gibbs 2015). These studies have sought to examine rural education issues alongside the significance of understanding differences in place and space for beginning teachers and experienced teachers alike. The insights from the research have implications for the preparation of beginning teachers, which I will explore further here.

To date, despite this growing understanding of the disparities that have long existed coupled with the clarity around understanding diversity and differences within 'rural places', education policy, staffing incentives *and* teacher education preparation collectively have tended to treat rural and urban schools as essentially the same. This is evident in the one-size-fits-all teacher preparation. The significance of *place* in relation to rurality, as evident in the incentives described earlier, does not seem to be on the agenda of the initial teacher education reform landscape, except to see it as 'deficit' and in need of fixing through metropolitan-based strategies. As a result:

> Rural communities have seen an urban agenda rolled out across the countryside, with issues of equity and access, rather than *appropriateness*, dominating the discourse. It is as if rural society is to be judged in terms of a deficit discourse (dominated by the desire to make them like us) rather than a diversity discourse (recognition and value of difference). (Atkin 2003, p. 515, emphasis added)

As Roberts and Green (2013) further explain in terms of education policy:

> It is this dualism of being different yet the same, that reveals how space and place are ill-considered notions in Australian education policy and how a subsequent 'geographical blindness' (Green and Letts 2007) has resulted in social justice approaches that are unable to consider the particularities of (rural) places. (p. 765)

More work is required to enable student teachers and teacher educators to understand the particularities of rural places.

8.5.1 Beyond a One-Size-Fits-All Approach to the Preparation of Rural Teachers: A Rural Social Space

Rural education studies (as noted earlier, see Brennan 2005; Halsey 2006; White and Reid 2008; Reid et al. 2010; Somerville and Rennie 2012; Cuervo 2012; Roberts and Green 2013; Green 2015; Kline and Walker-Gibbs 2015) have revealed that the issue lies in not only the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to rural education, curriculum, staffing and teacher preparation, but also in the 'deficit' view that perpetuates such inequity. As an alternative, Reid et al. (2010) argue that rurality involves a complex interaction of economy, geography and demography. They offer a 'rural social space' framework to explore the uniqueness of rural places. A 'rural social space' (Reid et al. 2010) is 'the set of relationships, actions and meanings that are produced in and through the daily practice of people in a particular place and time' (p. 269).

'Rural places' differ in terms of their history, culture, geography, economy and demography, and beginning teachers need to approach the decision and preparation to teach in a rural community by looking at the benefits of the community rather than from a deficit viewpoint (Thomson 2002). They need to acknowledge and match learning experiences that significantly build on the rich and diverse lives of rural and regional students and to be prepared to teach different developmental stages and ages in any one learning experience or classroom setting. They need not only to become classroom ready but to see that students come from families and bring with them their 'virtual schoolbags' (Thomson 2002). They need to see beyond the school gate to the place in which their school is located. Teacher educators are best placed to prepare the future rural workforce to do so.

As Reid et al. (2010) remind us, 'coming to know a place means recognising and valuing the forms of social and symbolic capital that exist there, rather than elsewhere. It means using the resources of the people who know' (p. 272). In other words, new teachers need to become 'community-ready' (White 2010). Looking at the benefits of the community and differences in places, while offering an alternative to the deficit–incentive cycle model critiqued thus far, could sound rather vague and pedestrian. Both 'place' and 'community' have been referred to as at risk of becoming 'motherhood' words to cover what is in essence still a deficit frame of mind. As Somerville and Rennie (2012) note, such terms need further exploration: 'It has long been understood in a wide variety of disciplines within the social sci-

ences and humanities that "community" is an over-used, ill-defined and contested term (Ife and Tesoriero 2006; Moje 2000)' (p. 194).

The term 'community' risks portraying 'rural places' as homogenous and harmonious if not viewed critically, and a rural social space approach to examining community works against this danger. In the final section, I highlight what 'community-ready' might mean using a variety of recent studies into beginning teachers' views of their experiences in rural schools. Using the findings, I raise possibilities for changes that need to occur at a systems level – across teacher education providers, governments and schools – to enact change.

8.5.2 Ways Forward for a Transformative Approach: Exploring Place-Based Pedagogy and Community Readiness for Teacher Educators

What is meant by community ready? In the longitudinal study by Somerville and Rennie (2012, p. 197), new teachers from across Gippsland in Victoria were asked about how they learned to do their work as teachers once they began full-time employment in teaching, and how they learned about the places and communities in which they began teaching. Four themes of community emerged from of the study (community as geographic space, community as moral space, community as curriculum space and community as social space):

- *Geographic space*: Beginning teachers tend to view the school and community as one geographical place which they live and work in or near to – often describing the place physically as well as their connection to the place personally, for example, a place they are returning to.
- *Moral space*: Beginning teachers tend to view community and school separately and describe their role as a teacher in the community as someone who needs to be careful of how they behave as they are a role model. For example, drinking in the community is not viewed favourably.
- *Curriculum space*: Beginning teachers tend to see the community as a resource they can draw from and use in classroom activates, excursions and incursions.
- *Social space*: Beginning teachers view the community as a place to connect socially and describe playing sport or being involved in community-based events as important for their identity and work.

Somerville and Rennie (2012) also explored storylines of place and community which revealed two powerful storylines: one where teachers saw community as a comfortable and familiar space of belonging and the other in which they saw community as abject and other to the self. These storylines are consistent with Sharplin's (2002) study into pre-service teacher's perceptions of their rural professional experience, viewed as either 'heaven' or 'hell'. They are also consistent with interview data in case studies of beginning rural teachers in the Studying the Effectiveness of

Teacher Education (SETE) project (see Mayer et al. 2014, 2017) and further discussed by Kline and Walker-Gibbs (2015). We know that beginning teachers need their initial preparation to be structured and scaffolded developmentally to help them learn about the differences in place and reflect about their experiences in a supportive environment. It is not enough to trial a place for ten weeks at the beginning of their career.

Understanding the ways in which beginning teachers might view a 'community' is important as well as considering the divergence of the ways in which a beginning teacher might engage (or not) with the community from which students are drawn. The most promising and longstanding of the attempts to better connect schools to the outside school lives of children is the tradition of 'funds of knowledge', described as 'historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being' (Moll et al. 1992, p. 133). This research highlights the importance of preparing novice teachers for the particular 'place' in which they enter, work, learn, live and engage and highlights the complexity of 'community readiness'.

This type of preparation needs to occur within the initial teacher education and cannot be replaced by any one incentive that treats rural as deficit. Community readiness needs to be taken up holistically in all the components of teacher education – both curriculum and professional experience. Rurality is *every* teacher educators' business, not just those who are geographically located in rural locations. Teacher educators are the key to better staffing our rural schools and addressing social inequality. Given the significance placed on school and community knowledge by beginning (rural) teachers in the socio-spatial research literature, a more expansive and community-ready approach to teacher education curriculum design and the professional learning of teacher educators is needed. Understandings of 'place' (Gruenewald 2003) and spatiality sit alongside this work. As Gruenewald (2003) explains: 'A theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human–world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say' (p. 624).

8.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, my argument is that current incentives to address perceived rural 'disadvantage' are not solving the rural staffing problem nor are they appearing to make any headway in curbing or addressing the growing gap in social inequality – in fact they may be unwittingly contributing to it. One of the reasons that the incentives appear to be failing could be 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. They require little effort by teacher education providers or schools to change their own preparation and induction models. They bypass teacher educators (both at the university level and at the school level) who are key to the

preparation of teachers and who require professional learning to better understand the diversity of rural places in which beginning teachers might start their careers.

Universities at the national level continue to be required for accreditation purposes to develop a one-size-fits-all teacher preparation curriculum, and yet the needs of diverse contexts are different (not deficit). As Somerville and Rennie (2012) emphasise:

> We suggest that the site of teacher education, and the first years of teacher learning at work, are critical for learning 'community' as our study suggests that these assumptions become more entrenched as new teachers are further socialised into the institution of schooling. (p. 193)

We have come full circle in response to the question: How can we better prepare and support the next generation of beginning teachers for our rural schools? The answers seem to be in the professional learning of teacher educators and a renewal of teacher preparation both at universities and schools to embed a 'rural social space' (Reid et al. 2010) approach. Current funding and resourcing for incentives could be channelled into the development of new models where pre-service teachers are well supported and scaffolded to understand the diversity of rural places and the importance of understanding the 'funds of knowledge' (Gonzalez et al. 2005) of the students they teach. Given the entrenched issues for staffing rural schools, the status quo is not working and it is time for a transformative, system approach to teacher education.

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