Rethinking the regional, rural and remote education workforce

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Introduction

Two recent high profile events have cast a spotlight on regional, rural and remote education (RRRE): the release of the latest NAPLAN results and the Australian Government's 2022 announcement of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review. The spotlight reveals that while there are students "in the bush" achieving high results and pursuing quality post-school pathways and careers, far too many are not.

Educational underachievement coupled with very limited opportunities are a brake on individuals realising their hopes and aspirations. From a societal point of view, there are also major costs when the full potential of each person is lost to the common good. A couple of examples of the forgone costs taken from my 2018 report (see Halsey, 2018) into regional, rural and remote education substantiate the point:

> … research shows that people not in full-time work or study by age 24 and who continue in this way over a 40-year period, produce a cost impact on society of around $412,000 per person. The total fiscal and social cost of a lifetime of disengagement is $69.3 billion, using 2014 figures of 45,700 people (Lamb and Huo, 2017). This amount represents about 15% of all of the Australian Government budgeted expenditure for 2016/17 (budget.gov.au).

> In a similar vein, it is well documented that one consequence of young people becoming disengaged from education before they complete their schooling is a greater propensity for them to drift into crime and then becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. The financial costs associated with this far exceed those of providing a 'top quality' education and there are major social implications and costs as well (Halsey & Deegan, 2015) in (Halsey, 2018, p. 24).

Rethinking and redesigning the regional, rural and remote education workforce is critical to closing the achievement and opportunities gaps for students and families who live in these locations. It is not the complete answer, given the range and diversity of factors which impact on and support learning, but is definitely "worth a go!"

In this article, I focus on four aspects of rethinking the RRRE workforce. First, some considerations to understand the scale, scope, and diversity of RRR contexts and the nation's valuing of them. Second, initial teacher education and leadership preparation. Third, recruitment and staffing models. Fourth, community capacity building for improved learning.

Scale, scope, diversity

Throughout my involvement in RRRE, commencing as a teacher in 1967, a principal in the 1980s, through to a senior state education bureaucrat, and finally an academic from 2003, I have consistently observed an overall lack of knowledge and understanding of two seminal aspects of RRR contexts shown by many who have key policy and operational decision-making roles. Yet, both need to be at the centre of re-thinking and redesigning the RRR workforce.

First is the size and scale, the dimensions, as well as the diversity of RRR contexts. By way of illustration, Australia is the sixth largest landmass in the world, has an overall population density of 3.3 per square kilometre and fewer than five million of its 26 million people live in almost two thirds of the country (WA, SA, NT). In addition, population density varies from over 30,000 per square kilometre in inner Melbourne to less than one for the whole of the Northern Territory. As well, and including all of the capital cities, there are only nineteen population centres in Australia of more than 100,000. Three states, WA, SA and NT, only have one and these are their capital cities.

Second is grasping and fully appreciating the size and distribution of the schooling footprint in Australia.

There are over 9,000 schools with a total enrolment of just over 4 million students, with around two thirds attending government schools, about 20% Catholic schools and 16% independent schools. While definitions of schools by location vary by state/territory jurisdictions, about 4,000 schools are in RRR locations and educating around one million students which is a quarter of the school-going population. As well, in 2022, there are 1,835 schools with enrolments of up to 100 students and most of these are in RRR locations (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023)

Another prominent feature of schooling in RRR locations (though not exclusively) is the number and type of combined schools. Typically, these enrol primary and secondary students and may also have a pre-school service, a special education focus, and outreach facilities such as a school-community library. In addition, a school or cluster of RRR schools might share a mobile resource like the Big Red Truck Outback College of Hospitality Trade Training Centre in Central West Queensland (Queensland Government, 2023).

Initial teacher education

An enduring workforce issue for RRRE is attracting and then retaining teachers and leaders, especially to schools and locations which prospective applicants might not "as a matter of course" have on their career pathway radar. While we are currently experiencing teacher shortages in a more across-the-board way than has been the case for many years, teacher shortages and teachers working outside their fields of training/expertise are relatively common and widespread scenarios in RRR schools.

Redesigning entry into a teaching degree and the content of degree programs would help to improve a steady flow of well qualified graduates who have been appropriately prepared for teaching and living in RRR contexts. To achieve this, selection into a teaching degree has to be broadened from almost sole reliance on an ATAR score. It needs to be based on three sources of evidence to form a composite profile to enable a judgement to be made about the suitability of an applicant for a position in a teaching degree program.

First are the personal qualities and the indicative aspirations of an applicant. I acknowledge that assessing a worthwhile and fair sense of each person can be difficult, time consuming, problematic and contested. Against this, without exception, the personal qualities of teachers and especially their abilities to build and sustain nurturing relationships with students and others, are of paramount importance. This was an enduring theme for the hundreds of people I met around Australia while conducting the review referred to earlier and has surfaced regularly during my more than half a century experience as an educator.

Second, an applicant's ATAR score or equivalent has to reflect an ability to successfully complete the academic requirements of a degree with a Grade Point Average (GPA) of 5.0, i.e., at a Credit level. It is the overall outcome level of completing a degree that is more important than simply raising the ATAR entry bar. Stipulating a precise ATAR cut off would do little to progress major improvements. However, while it makes little sense to attempt to differentiate the cognitive capacities of two students based on ATAR scores of say 97 and 96.5, it is reasonable to argue there are differences we need to pay attention to where the gap is large, such as an ATAR of 85 and one of 50.

Third, every person studying to become a teacher must have the option of taking a fully resourced extended RRR placement as part of their initial training. Fundamentally, a new blend of academic study and extended field-based experience is required. Kotter and Cohen (2002), Harvard based authorities on change, argue from their many years of research that "people change what they do less because they are given *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* a truth that influences their *feelings*" (p. 1, italics in original).

Being *in* a RRR school and community provides unparalleled opportunities for teachers in training to viscerally experience and learn about becoming and being a teacher in such contexts and locations. The minimum duration needs to be a school term taken as continuous block. This amount of time enables participants to see the connection between their planning and organisation as a teacher and students' learning as a consequence. As well, a term gives them the opportunity to appreciate the energy and resilience required to be an effective teacher over the long haul. Programs I ran while at Flinders University (and which have continued) plus various others throughout Australia and overseas, clearly show that living and learning to be a teacher in situ in a RRR school is highly beneficial to individual students, contributes to the professional capacities of their hosting schools, and can make important contributions to local communities through skills and talents not available locally, such as in music, drama or sport. As I wrote in my report to the Australian Government:

> Being a teacher in a RRR location, especially one that is very distant from a major centre with only a small school (say of less than 50 students) and one that is culturally diverse, presents a beginning teacher [especially] with many complex variables they have to work with as part of their commencement. Rural and remote contexts, while providing unique and challenging opportunities for teachers both professionally and personally, are also highly demanding. This is primarily because of small and thin density populations and a suite of characteristics that place significant value upon relationships and an appreciation of local knowledge. For teachers, small communities can accentuate their visibility and lack of anonymity and, frequently, the transient nature of their appointment. The combination of contextual factors and the profile factors requires knowledgeable and skilful negotiating and navigating by teachers to ensure they build their capacities and effectiveness. (Halsey, 2018, pp. 39 &40)

As well:

> .... substantial opportunities are required during initial teacher education for candidates to deeply engage with and reflect upon being a teacher in a RRR context. Relevant literature and research about this, including the role and importance of RRR locations and communities drawn from around the world, plus insights from other areas such as globalisation [including sustainability], development studies and rural sociology, need to be included in teacher education degrees and programs. Opportunities to learn with students preparing for other professions like social work, guidance, speech therapists and community nursing should also be widely available.

As well, ways and means of developing relationships with parents, families and students to nurture aspirations and hope need to be included in a dedicated focus on preparation to be a teacher in an RRR school and community. (Halsey, 2018, pp. 40).

The quantum and quality of the resources allocated to preparing doctors and allied health workers for RRR locations provides an enviable contrast to the comparatively meagre funding allocated to teachers and educational leaders for RRR placements. While the funding for rural medicine does not solve all of the problems, it certainly makes a vital, indeed indispensable, contribution to the RRR health services workforce (Australian Government Department of Health, n.d.).

There are at least three main cost drivers in implementing nationally the choice of a term-length RRR placement for teachers in training. These are now discussed. First is the provision of an allowance to fully meet income foregone from a part-time job, which most students have, in order to meet essential living costs, pay for accommodation while on placement and to maintain access to their home base, plus travel expenses. Next are the costs of arranging and administering an extended placement which must include regular university supervision. Finally, there are the costs generated through salary loadings for teachers and others who provide the daily in-school support. The extended rural placements I was involved with at Flinders University in 2016 allocated students up to $5,000 for travel, accommodation and living expenses for a 10-week practicum. Given rising cost of living pressures plus the need to factor in administration and in situ supervision, two to three times this amount per student is required. So, $50–75m annually would likely fund around 5,000 extended RRR placements.

Another option for re-thinking and expanding the potential pool of graduate teachers for RRR locations would be to locate their initial training in a broader context than just education. As has already been flagged in the article, special measures are required in other professions such as health and skilled vocations to ensure RRR people and communities can access essential human services and support. Individual degree and skilled vocations training in a range of fields like education, health, care, law and accounting, and mechanical, technical and construction services, could come under the umbrella of say a *Professions and Services for RRR* nationwide workforce development program. With appropriate funding and recognition, universities and nationally accredited vocational training organisations would likely be motivated to lead such an initiative.

Recruitment and staffing

Research shows that teachers have the most direct impact on students and their learning, followed by principals and other leaders (Hattie, 2009; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). A pervasive and continuing challenge for RRR education over many decades is getting experienced and highly competent teachers and leaders appointed to the most in need schools and communities. As I was told during a review consultation session in rural South Australia, "all employees have to start their working life somewhere but we would like more teachers in our schools who are at the top of their game" (Halsey, 2018, p. 42).

What can be done to deliver on this ask? Three ideas based upon my 2018 report are included here. First, ways to better match the educational needs of RRR schools with the "best fit for need" teachers and leaders have to be implemented. An example is a bespoke invitational approach for staffing RRR schools. Integral to this is addressing a key concern held very widely, namely, "if I do accept an appointment to a RRR school or cluster of schools, will I be able to return to my current or another preferred location?" Employment packages must

include an absolute guarantee for teachers to return to their originating/preferred school or workplace at the end of their RRR appointment unless they opt out of it (Halsey, 2018).

Secondly, more needs to be done to grow the expertise of teachers who are already in RRR schools. Key to this is resourcing professional development which is delivered mostly in situ and in partnership with a recognised professional development provider like a university or a peak professional body. Creating positions in RRR schools or clusters/groups of schools with a specific brief to build the capacities of teachers would also help (Halsey, 2018).

Thirdly, urban growth nurtures city centricity. Opening up fresh vistas of professional and lifestyle opportunity requires departments, professional associations, business and industry, and others, such as local councils, to work together to raise the public profile and importance of being a teacher in a RRR school and community. Local communities can also help by making "outsiders" feel welcome and refraining from making early judgements about individuals. As well, strategies to reduce the overall teacher turnover rate in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, and increasing the overall experience of those who are appointed, are urgently needed. Implementing up to a ½ term handover and induction period for teacher transfers would also help to foster continuity of students' learning where there is a history of frequent teacher turnover and substantial student under achievement (Halsey, 2018).

Schools and communities

What happens in the lives of young people "outside the school fence" is critical to their success while at school. This has been known for decades and, in my professional lifetime, came to prominence via the US based Coleman study published by the United States government in 1966 under the title Equality of Educational Opportunity (in Dickinson, 2016). The latest *Dropping off the Edge Report* (See Tanton et al., 2021) has identified 35 indicators of disadvantage ranging from intergenerational unemployment, overcrowded housing, frequent engagement with the criminal justice system, to particulate matter in the atmosphere in mining towns. From an RRR perspective, "when the geographic pattern of disadvantage is examined, the most disadvantaged locations [are] outside the capital cities, in regional and remote areas" (Tanton et al., 2021, p. 208).

Doing more and doing things differently to reduce disadvantages that impact on educational opportunities and achievement embedded in some, perhaps many, RRR families and communities, has major implications for re-thinking the RRR education workforce. Fundamentally, a *Community Capacity Building for Improved Learning (CCBIL)* strategy is needed to engage and deal with community-embedded factors that impede students from optimising their learning and post-school opportunities. Such an initiative requires a substantial change to the expertise mix of personnel usually found in and associated with schools.

Historically, the staffing profile of schools has been remarkably stable. Teachers predominate, then administrative and support staff, plus access to specialists often external to a site and via a shared pool of expertise. Arguably, there seems to be resistance to opening up, freeing up, the types of school personnel who "as a matter of course" work closely and regularly with students and their families. This has to change so that the complex factors located beyond the school precinct can be dealt with effectively.

During the review of regional, rural and remote education referred to previously, I visited and heard of instances where concerted and highly effective efforts were addressing serious and

prolonged family and community disadvantage. They included maternal and child health nurses who worked closely with parents and in partnership with schools, health services, and local volunteers to ensure young children had the best possible start to life. At the other end of schooling, successes included mentors, industry owner–managers, and career advisers who facilitated leading-edge work placements and nurtured genuine entrepreneurial skills, knowledge, and opportunities. As well, there were programs and services providing a stable, predictable and safe place between being at school and being home, where friendships and networks could be formed and sustained.

The work and impact of examples briefly described, and many more, depended in large part on a diverse workforce from post-school and tertiary-trained, to recognised local leaders in a particular field, to volunteers. And while the main take away was "what is being done is helping and is successful" there was also a sense that the culture and modus operandi of schools dominated possibilities for continuity, for modification, and also for termination.

Provocatively, the core work of schools – teaching, learning and assessment – always take priority. Re-thinking this core to incorporate genuine RRR community capacity building for learning requires broadening the composition of the workforce that is generally accepted as "part and parcel" of schooling.

Conclusion

Major improvements to the design, preparation and support of the workforce for RRR schools are needed to significantly close the gap between the overall achievement profile of the students who attend these schools and their urban and city counterparts. This is a long haul and complex undertaking. Key policy and decision makers need a far greater appreciation of the scale, diversity and dimensions of rural, regional and remote education in Australia to kickstart efforts. Changing the way people are selected into teaching degrees to give more prominence to personal qualities as well as academic ability is essential to improving the initial preparation of graduates for the rigours as well as the rewards of teaching and living in RRR communities. Coupled with this must be the option to have at least a term-length fully funded placement in a RRR school prior to graduation. Radical changes to mainstream staffing policies practices are also needed urgently so that highly competent and experienced teachers are appointed to the most in need students and schools. Finally, the tight boundaries that education systems and schools maintain over the kinds of staff who are considered appropriate to be working in a school with students, have to be freed up. This is because, in RRR communities, building capacities for successful learning can also often mean dealing with various forms of disadvantage, sometimes of an intergenerational kind, which "live" outside the school fence.

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Bio

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