

The Small Rural School Principalship: Key Challenges and Cross-School Responses

Karen Starr and Simone White
Deakin University

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This article explores the responses of school principals of small rural schools in Victoria, Australia to leadership challenges they identify as characteristic of these contexts. The research is an exercise in grounded theory building, with the focus on the principalship as it is enacted in small rural settings. The article also seeks to trace the impact of macro and meso influences on micro rural contexts. While many very positive attributes of small rural schools are evident, this article speaks to principalship engagement with contextual problems – issues concerning work intensification, role multiplicity, school viability, new regulatory funding requirements and the abandonment of equity policies in education – since there is a dearth of information in Australia at this time about how school principals confront these challenges in small rural locations. The research exposes a growing culture of creative collaborative responses to the pervasive impediments of leading small rural schools.

Introduction

This article focuses on the principalship in small rural schools in Victoria, Australia, who face context-specific challenges in addition to those commonly experienced in schools. Currently there is scant research information about the enactment of school leadership in Australian rural locations in response to immediate national, and global issues. This is the void we seek to fill. However, while this article focuses on the Australian context, we believe that globalizing policy practices may create resonances elsewhere in the world.

There are contested views about what constitutes a small school and what constitutes rurality (Alston, 1999; Coladarci, 2007). In the Australian context, the differing definitions used by various levels of government confuse matters. The seminal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2000) national inquiry into rural

and remote education cites the problem of definitional inconsistency, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defining “rural” as all residences and settlements of less than 1,000 people, and the Commonwealth Government defining rural as all non-metropolitan places with fewer than 100,000 people. These differing definitions produce profound population differences:

using the ABS definition there are approximately 2.3 million rural Australians (less than 15% of the total population) while using the Commonwealth definition, this number rises to more than 5.7 million non-metropolitan Australians (approximately 34% of the total population). (HREOC, 2000, p. 2)

For our purposes we have accepted the Victorian education department’s definitions, with rural schools being 70 kilometers or more from Melbourne, the state capital, or 25 kilometers from a regional center with a population of 10,000 or more and small schools having an enrollment of 100 students or less. Suffice to say, most of Australia’s population is concentrated in a few coastal cities, hence within a large land mass there are many rural locations. Victoria is the smallest mainland state, with few locations being defined as remote, but with many being defined as rural.

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All correspondence should be directed to Professor Karen Starr, Director, Centre for Educational Leadership and Renewal, Deakin University, Victoria, Australia (karen.starr@deakin.edu.au).

The Research

This research arose out of our engagement in a state-wide professional development program for small rural principals of government schools, focusing on capacity building through collaboration on joint projects. It involved 90 principals from across the state, divided into three groups from the west, central, and eastern areas. We met face-to-face three times a year at residential forums in the three locations but maintained contact as they progressed on their collaborative projects and through a mentor program consisting of recently retired rural principals.

We engaged a socio-cultural position, privileging the lived experience of participants, who, in this case, became co-researchers. Epistemologically we drew on two interconnected assumptions: first, we assumed that large scale social structures constitute tangible realities; and secondly, personal and public aspects of life are constitutively linked (Connell, 1996). Social structures cannot be separated from contextualized practice or from the historicity of the period (Ball, 1994).

The research is the result of an exercise in grounded theory building, an approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), where theory emerges from the data gathered. Theory is not derived deductively, but rather is generated through an ongoing inductive process whereby emerging insights are analyzed and continually tested, producing further evidence and/or new theoretical insights (Hayes, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The research is data-driven rather than theory-driven. This iterative process of developing claims and interpretations determines its own end point when new data does not reveal any new insights but confirms theoretical elements that have already been identified (Punch, 1998). We shared research data with participants collectively to confirm our key findings and interpretations. Grounded theory is responsive to research situations and the people in it, and it supports examination of individual standpoint, complex contexts, considering the inextricability of macro, meso and micro connections, influences and consequences simultaneously (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory building endorses “studying up,” instead of “studying down” (Harding, 1987, p. 8).

Data collection occurred through intensive, semi-structured, recorded interviews with 76 principals (some conducted face-to-face and others via telephone); through whole group questionnaires; and through discussions and observations recorded as field notes. The research questions were:

- What are the major challenges confronting principals of small rural schools?
- How do principals perceive these challenges to be particular to small rural school contexts?

- What do principals perceive the causes of these challenges to be?
- How do small rural school principals address the major challenges they confront?

N-Vivo qualitative data software aggregated emergent themes, with initial data informing subsequent questions and forum discussions.

Considerations of Context

In order to fully appreciate the challenges faced by small rural school principals, it is necessary to discuss contextual matters concerning the changed nature of the principalship, the issues that confront rural Australia at the current time and the distinctive characteristics of the principalship in small rural settings.

Educational Restructure and Reform

For more than two decades Australian educational provision and administration has changed irrevocably through structural reforms at the state and federal levels. Structural reforms embrace the restructuring of the purposes, nature and scope of government departments/agencies, and reform of government policy and procedure in line with free market and neo-liberal beliefs (Apple, 2006). The word “restructuring” is used frequently to refer to fundamental reconfigurations of the dominant discourses and philosophical, organizational, or budgetary bases of public sector agencies.

Structural reforms in Australian education are a response to globalization, particularly with concern for international competitiveness in trade, workforce capacity, innovation, and educational outcomes. Globalization encompasses how we look at the world and the “... processes which affect nation states and produce policy mediations, which in turn have a direct impact on the management and principalship of educational institutions” (Bottery, 2004, p. 34). Structural reforms are informed by neo-liberal precepts of individualism, consumer choice, deregulation, the devolution of authority, and the rolled back state, while emphasizing efficiency and fiscal restraint (Levin & Belfield, 2006). In collusion with these dominant discourses are those supporting new public administration based on corporate management. These involve centralized regulation, compliance, and accountability, and emphasize quality assurance, continuous improvement, and performativity gauged through performance indicators, standards, capability statements, and benchmarks (Ball, 2006; Duignan, 2006).

In education, structural reforms have taken two distinct forms. First, there are those which have swept across entire public infrastructures: corporatization, privatization, outsourcing, re-engineering, and the introduction of user-

pays principles which target costs to consumers. The second form of restructuring concerns the devolution of authority to service sites, such as local school management in schools. These restructuring activities dovetail neatly together. For example, as education bureaucracies downsize, it is commonsense that the work once performed centrally be delegated to individual site managers (Starr, 2000). These prescribed tasks are overseen centrally via standardized controls and accountabilities. As a result of structural reforms the principalship has change irrevocably (Gronn, 2003).

Recently all Australian states have introduced leadership frameworks, standards, or capability statements to guide the work and professional learning of school leaders (e.g., Department of Education, Victoria, 2007). These documents emphasize school improvement through the attainment of superior student results and leadership capacity building with a focus on distributed leadership models. These new reforms require a re-balancing of principals' work back to the core business of teaching and learning and away from managerial tasks. Comparative league tables and mandated standardized student testing exercises will provide incentive and ensure principals' accountability in instructional leadership (Starr, 2007).

As Bottery (2004) observes, nation states have responded to globalization with policy interventions which impact on schools. Like many other places in the world, Australia's neo-liberal and neo-conservative policy agenda has been driven by economic restructuring, justified and legitimized through political rhetoric about educational crises, the erosion of social values, inefficiency in the public sector, and the need for parental choice and voice in education (Dale, 1989; Shapiro, 1990; Pusey, 1991). Education is bound up with the nation state's economic exigencies emanating from capitalist modes of production, and their maintenance and protection in globalizing de-regulated markets. Outputs are to be produced at the lowest cost through budgetary restraint, while outcomes are expected to improve through policy coercion. As Apple (2006) suggests, crises within the political economy have influenced education policy agendas, with a parrying of these crises downwards, from the economy through the state and on to schools. Unfortunately for small rural schools, globalization has created additional deleterious effects, which are important contextual matters to be considered before turning our attention to small rural school principals.

Changing Rural Communities

The rural communities at the focus of this study are experiencing various forms of social and economic decline. Drought has been widespread in Australia for most of the past decade and has taken a huge toll on economic livelihoods, especially in agricultural communities. Rural locations are

also more prone to other dramatic climatic events such as bushfires and floods.

Radical social and economic change is also the result of world economic re-alignment, especially the rise of China and India. Global competition has encouraged many long-standing rural industries to relocate commercial activities off-shore to reduce labor costs, or to close altogether. Alongside the effects of drought, this phenomenon has created large-scale unemployment and population migration to cities and mining regions for work, with concomitant effects on the viability and survival of local rural businesses and public services, including schools. The cost of capital is increasing while downwards pressure is being exerted on labor costs, hence many rural dwellers seek work elsewhere to derive or supplement income, often leaving children to be brought up primarily by a single parent. Rural schools located closer to larger regional centers are noticing a shift in enrollment trends as welfare dependent families relocate to acquire affordable accommodation.

The Small Rural School Principalship

A significant difference between principals of small rural schools and their metropolitan counterparts is that they spend a larger percentage of their time teaching cross-age, multi-grade groups of students. There is little in the way of administrative support, with ancillary personnel such as receptionists, bursars, and grounds staff being part-time employees. However, standardized compliance requirements issued at the federal, state, and district levels involve the same responses from all schools irrespective of size or location. Principals of larger schools have greater capacity to delegate and share management tasks, but this is a luxury not afforded to their small rural counterparts. The demands of life in small rural communities create unconventional circumstances for principals.

The Major Challenges Confronting Small Rural Principals

The contextual differences encountered by principals of small rural schools create either additional leadership challenges to those experienced elsewhere or challenges that are intensified in impact. While principals raised many types of challenges, the most commonly raised themes concerned: workload proliferation, educational equity issues, the re-defined principalship, escalating role multiplicity, and school survival. Each theme embraces myriad challenges that manifest in diverse ways. These challenges are recursively linked and exert significant influence on the lived experience of principals in small rural schools. They are discussed in turn below.

The Impact of Reforms: "They're Making Things Worse"

Recent reforms in Australian education have significantly affected the way schools operate and the way principals are positioned. The most obvious change and

common concern expressed by principals is the increasing amount of mandatory administrative and compliance work arriving from district, state, and federal governments. All principals have experienced incremental additions to their workload over the past two decades, with “function creep” exacerbating this issue. With little time to lead and manage school affairs, however, this is viewed as the most undesirable challenge in contexts where principals teach for a greater proportion of their time than their metropolitan counterparts. Principals expressed concern about the deleterious effects of workload expansion in the following ways:

I’m running the whole day.... I find it very hard to close the door when someone wants to see me—because who else would they see? ... It’s getting worse the longer I’m in the job.

It’s very tiring.... You just never stop.... It’s just never-ending, I’m always busy.

[I]t’s the horrendous hours you put in to do things well ... so it’s huge.... You’ve still got to do all the things you’ve got to do in bigger schools, but you’ve only got one day of SSO [administrative school services officer] support, and by the time they pay the bills ... and get stuff ready for the school council, what’s normally left ... is left to you.... I just put in the extra hours.

Principals express much anger about increasing bureaucratic interference, which is changing the nature of their role and controlling their work. Externally-imposed tasks are unrelated to school priorities, take considerable time to execute and take principals away from more enjoyable and professionally rewarding activities concerning teaching, students, and learning. Principals see their main role as an instructional leader, but they are denied adequate time for this most important aspect of their work (Barley & Beesley, 2007). Workload pressures also steal time from family life. Small rural principals do not have assistant principals and unanimously complained about a lack of administrative support in undertaking increasing external demands. The breadth of this problem is captured in these comments:

There’s a feeling of great frustration amongst principals for the lack of support and care from the Department.... I think we’re getting sick of trying to make do.... Morale is terribly low for principals ... the role is busier and more complex.

I ... work every night of the week. You work most Sundays.... If it’s for the school you don’t mind, but if it’s for the Department you tend to put it off ... otherwise you’d be working all of the time.... You can’t take a day off.

The work[load] has skyrocketed and resources have disappeared.... There’s no time to do anything thoroughly.... The Department’s on about outcomes and improvement, but how do they expect it’s going to happen? They’re making things worse.

The support and money [from] the Department isn’t there now. The job satisfaction isn’t what it used to be. The demands are getting greater and greater.... People are getting a lot more jaded than they used to ... they’re getting run down. There’s too much expectation and responsibility put on principals.

There are many aspects to these concerns, including the side-lining of important educational matters to managerial tasks, feelings of isolation, rising stress levels, decreasing professional satisfaction, and unrealistic expectations of principals. Small rural school principals unanimously state they require additional human resources to enable incessant workloads to be accomplished. There is also concern that workload issues are creating succession problems by detracting potential leadership aspirants who see the principalship as requiring too much effort for too little reward.

There is also consensus that reformed educational management policies incorporate increasingly authoritative and inflexible hierarchical structures that are administratively technical and constraining. One result is that much of what principals do in the course of their work is also hidden from view. Principals receive no tangible positive outcomes for their schools after performing this time-consuming labor on behalf of federal, state, and district education bureaucracies.

We questioned principals as to what actions they take in response to changes incurred through efficiencies such as local school management policies. All have simply absorbed the extra requirements into their existing work lives, arguing that they are too busy to engage with – let alone fight – reforms, especially in contexts where personnel time is at a premium. They are too busy just coping with the local, the everyday, the immediate, and have no time to participate in broader politics or contexts. There is also a sense of resignation that reform mandates are beyond the realm of principals’ control, even though they wield significant influence and effects. There is dismay in the thought that workloads will probably continue to increase. The smaller the school, the more severe this problem becomes for principals.

Restricted Resource Allocation: “Jumping through the Funding Hoops”

Principals of small rural schools complain that they have to do more with less. Resources are declining, with many

being dependent on the preparation of successful funding submissions, whereas in previous times schools received these resources as a matter of course. “Targeting” funding to supposed areas of need is a controversial change, since some of a school’s most important resources for addressing educational equity appear to be totally dependent on a principal’s ability to prepare a strong, convincing case via standardized templates. For example, staffing for students with special needs is now a submission-based exercise, with strict criteria to be addressed, resulting in fewer students qualifying for extra support. Funding for special education is an area identified as being out of the reach of general school budgets. Paradoxically, principals in small rural contexts are able to relate to students on a one-to-one basis yet do not have the human resources to provide intensive individualized instruction and programming due to work intensification and role plurality. Centrally-derived resources are difficult to obtain despite increasing learning support needs as homogeneity decreases in some rural populations. If funding submissions are successful, the work attached to the exercise does not end there. Suitable teachers have to be sourced, and progress and final reports are required, detailing evidence of learning improvements. This takes an enormous amount of extra time and effort for every special needs student on the part of principals who do everything themselves. One long-standing principal stated:

It’s so hit and miss, you get to the stage where you can hardly be bothered. The schools that get the goodies ... can write good submissions, and they’re usually larger schools where they share the leadership load.

“What Happened to Equity?”

An allied concern is that equal opportunities, social justice, and equity policies in education are viewed as so diminished as to be practically defunct. Principals say that these previously publicly-espoused policy goals have been silently passed over and have slipped off the policy agenda over the past decades without debate or announcement. Asked how the social democratic agenda disappeared without furor or fanfare, one leader said:

People ... were too consumed with new realities to protest, so ... equity [programs] expired along with the resources they used to bring.

Another accused work intensification and time constraints:

It was one less thing to have to worry about, one less meeting to attend.... I can’t remember how it happened, but it ... vanished and we just kept on going.

Principals perceive that discourses concerning competitive individualism and efficiency have overturned the previous social democratic, welfarist consensus about

equality in educational provision and outcomes. They believe that macro and meso policy morality is disappearing with deleterious effects at the micro school level. One principal stated her frustration in this way:

I get the impression that if you’re [a] small [school], people think you can cope.... You haven’t got that many kids to deal with, so you don’t need extra resources. You should just get on with it. I think we’re disadvantaged from a perception point of view. I think we’re viewed as so insignificant as to not matter very much.... So you start to think, “Why bother?”

There is a prevailing sense that fundamental, incontrovertible values about equity should underpin education policy and the work of schools, yet these have been abandoned, further disadvantaging students already less advantaged through location. Similar observations have occurred overseas, such as the debate about the effectiveness of the No Child Left Behind policy in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2007), demonstrating that contextual difficulties in practice and provision do affect the ability of some schools to meet policy expectations.

The Marginalization of School Principals

Principals feel dislocated and alienated from debates about education policy-making, whereas previously they felt more involved, connected, and integral to the business of making a difference and setting direction. The consensus is that principals are marginalized and ignored by education bureaucracies.

A related issue concerns a lack of professional contact or support. Many principals do not feel supported by the education system at the state or district level. The majority view is that a division exists – with those on the inside having very little understanding about small rural school life and leadership challenges. Some small rural principals suggest that regional and central education officers feel antipathy towards them, although a similar level of opposition and division is evident in the other direction. Comments concerned principals feeling ignored, “being on the back foot,” being “hailed over the coals,” or being the subject of negative judgments which affect future career options. There is also the sense that the system is not set up to assist schools or principals, but rather is there to mandate, appraise, control, and admonish when expectations are not met. The system is a nuisance; it is unsupportive and detracts from the most important work of schools. These sentiments are intertwined with concerns about incessant waves of structural reforms. The following comments reveal overt and covert examples of inimicality with the system:

As for disadvantages – probably the lack of understanding from the hierarchy and that would be from my Deputy Regional director upwards.

She has brought to her position no understanding of being a principal let alone a small [rural] school principal and that's a criticism.... She just doesn't have the background. She doesn't get lots of stuff.

It's no good taking problems to the District Office. They'll think you're not coping, or tell you what to do and make sure you do it their way. [I]f you complain or ask for help, you're considered to be a nuisance or ineffective.

[T]he Department is just out of touch. They have no idea what we do because they've never done it. Everything they want us to do just gets in the way of what you're really here for – the kids. It makes the job very frustrating and ... it's getting worse every year.

A lot of emotion is caught up in these statements. The commentary speaks to veiled modes of sanction, punishment (or fear of it), inducement, and coercion. The principals are concerned about having to implement policy they perceive to be irrelevant or inappropriate to the needs of small rural schools. Overlaying all of this is not only physical isolation, but also a sense of psychological alienation from the new policy hegemony.

The Constraints of Role Multiplicity

Many professional frustrations are intertwined with concerns about the effects of ongoing reforms. Small rural principals who also spend a substantial amount of their time teaching face multiple conflicting work demands in ways that far exceed those of their non-rural peers. Small rural principals wear many more hats (Buckingham, 2003), having to be generalists and straddling a line between the demands of teaching, leadership, and administration. The necessity of teaching multi-grade and ability levels concurrently and the absence of personnel such as assistant principals, business managers, student counselors, specialist teachers, and maintenance staff make the job more labor intensive.

Conflicting role demands and resource constraints create tensions, and incumbents feel stretched to the limits by myriad roles that cannot be executed thoroughly due to a lack of time for any particular task. And while all principals complain about being constantly interrupted, this is even more of an issue when only a handful of adults work at the school. Role complexity, the multi-directional and multi-focused demands, and the worries they create are difficult challenges. One principal described his disparate workload in this way:

You have to constantly be on the front foot.... You try and keep up with what the Department wants, you have to watch your numbers [enrollments], you have to keep an ear to the ground to know

what's happening in the community that might spill over into the school, and you have to watch how staff in the school are faring with pressures to do as much as a large school does. It's a juggling act that's a lot about survival.

Others commented on the recent shift in policy emphasis back to measurable teaching and learning achievements. This change does not entail a swing of the pendulum, but rather an expectation that the current managerial focus will continue on top of new demands for demonstrably improved student learning outcomes:

I think it's a really big task to have quality results in both areas [teaching and administration].... Something has to give at some point.

I can guarantee I'd get better results and I'd be proud to have them published, but I can't even get to really thinking about this unless I ignore all the administrivia.... That's where you spend most of your so-called "leadership" time – on laborious paperwork that has nothing to do with teaching and learning. We are constrained from achieving the best for students – we can't spend time with them.

Commonly principals complain about a lack of privacy and space. For example, the great majority of small rural schools do not have a dedicated principal's office. Office space is shared with occasional administrative staff. Confidential conversations or telephone calls are difficult to handle (and mobile phone access is unavailable in some areas).

School Viability and Survival: "Don't Get Caught Riding a Dead Horse"

Issues of school viability are a constant source of stress (Eastley, 2004; Goode, 2007). If schools become too small, they will be closed. One positive outcome of prolonged drought in Australia, if there is one, is that governments are more reluctant to close schools in communities experiencing hardship on so many fronts, although through the period of this study, one of the 90 schools involved closed and several other principals believed their school's longevity to be under threat. In more auspicious times, perhaps many more small rural schools will be deemed unviable and sacrificed.

Viability concerns enrollments but attracting students amid widespread diminution of many rural populations is impossible. Many schools face continual enrollment decline and population growth trends show no immediate solution to this problem. The following comments reveal the pervasive influence of student numbers on small rural schools:

You're concerned all the time about survival. [The school is] ... an asset in the community, you wonder what would happen if it closed. So you watch the enrollments and fear every time

a family moves out of the district taking several kids with them. You can't get caught riding a dead horse.

The numbers went down quite rapidly ... due to local demographics. We had big groups – well big for us, say 10 in each class. Then those students went off to high school and we were left with only 3 or 4 kids per class.

Our numbers are decreasing. Because we're isolated, there's not much up here anymore employment-wise. We get a few transient families who will stay for 4-6 months and leave again.... [This school] is not cost effective ... and that makes you worry about what [will happen] in the longer term.

We have to make do and do more with less. There should be differential staffing that recognizes the real needs.... But while we're losing numbers, the staffing formula makes things worse. You lose teachers and it's even busier. We should have more control over human resources.

While staffing levels are tied to enrollments, specialized school programs become very precarious.

There have been more school closures over the past three decades than ever before in Australia, and communities that lose their schools struggle to survive (Alston, 1999; Eastley, 2004). One leader cited the situation where a family left the district, taking several children out of the local school leaving only one girl remaining on the roll. Concerned about this occurrence, the girl's parents decided to have her schooled in a neighboring town. This concerned the boys' parents since the co-educational school experience they expected was no longer available. The school community decided the school should be closed with extra resources provided for transportation arrangements to the neighboring school. Hence, if a rural school closes, it usually means that children are forced to travel long distances to alternative schools. This affects their time, energy levels, and educational ambitions (Alston, 1999). A significant issue in closures and amalgamations is that a school principal has to lose his/her job, making this very difficult option for principals to agree upon.

Another major issue concerning size and viability is that of negative economies of scale, with a far greater cost per student for schooling provision in small rural locations (Picard, 2003). Schools receive recurrent funding and staffing levels based on per capita formulae, meaning that in small schools annual budgets and staff count may change noticeably as enrollments fluctuate even slightly. For example, one principal in this study complained that his school lost a teacher and \$46,000 AUD (\$43,200 USD) in

revenue when six students left. While costs increase, income often fails to adjust upwards, so schools have to employ very sound financial practices. Cash flow problems occur regularly, especially when government grants sometimes arrive too late to cover many operational costs. There are widespread concerns about budget shortfalls, with necessary maintenance work being put off and expenditure on resources or new initiatives being delayed. Higher poverty rates and lower incomes limit fundraising possibilities.

These key challenges are affecting how small rural principals operate, with trends emerging in response to structural reforms and their concomitant accoutrements.

Responses to Challenges: Emerging Trends in Collaboration

While feeling marginalized systemically, principals are empowered within local contexts. Challenges in leading small rural schools have led to creative initiatives, proving that sometimes educational obstacles may be opportunities in disguise. As a result of some seemingly insurmountable challenges, rural communities are moving beyond traditional pathways to deliver educational benefits for their students. These include community involvement, cross-school activities, and extensive use of information and communication technologies.

Working Together within and across Schools

School leaders are working collectively to cover teaching, learning, leadership, and management requirements, with collaborations being on the up-take and seemingly increasingly essential. Collective activities have been prompted by the requirements of structural reforms and problems of limited resources and are aided by new technologies and a renewed sense of community "self-help" brought about by years of rural hardship. As the following principals explain, pragmatism is at the basis of collaborative efforts:

We decided to combine our collective funding to hire a teacher for six schools, and share learning resources. [The literacy focus] was critical so we went from there, starting with "how can we solve this problem rather than re-inventing the wheel?"

There's a range of activities that are organized across the schools – drama days, inter-school sports days, combined professional development days.

The job is getting bigger all the time. You can't do it all yourself. You can't get caught up in all the red tape about parents needing police checks and not being out of sight of teachers.... You just have to be pragmatic – do what needs to be done and take on any help that's on offer.

The final comment demonstrates how pragmatism gets tasks achieved but at times presents policy dilemmas.

These sorts of activities strike a chord with the levels of clustering identified by VicHealth, the state's government health department, who identifies similar activities occurring amongst health professionals. The "levels of clustering" (VicHealth, 2008) are classified as follows: *Networking* involves exchanging information for mutual benefit. This requires little time or trust between participants. *Coordination* embraces, but goes beyond, networking to include transformative practices towards a common purpose, such as coordinating a district event. *Cooperation* embraces but extends networking and coordination to include the sharing of resources, requiring more time, a higher level of trust and sharing (personnel, resources, and facilities). *Collaboration* is the highest level of clustering and extends all of the above even further to include enhancing the capacity of other partners for mutual benefit and towards a common purpose. This requires partners to give up a part of their "turf" to another partner to create an improved or more seamless approach. In the schooling context, giving up a part of one's turf may mean relinquishing an activity being done well and passing control to another school in order to focus on a leadership strength on behalf of the cluster.

This research identified all the levels of clustering described above, with many examples of the higher level collaborative clustering. High level collaborations include many players: participants from government (local, state, and Commonwealth); business (chambers of commerce, local businesses); community services (such as youth, sporting, health, and other community groups); and other education providers (from pre-school, vocational education, and tertiary institutions alongside informal providers such as neighborhood centers). Small rural schools want to promote community pride and educational opportunity and have assurance of their on-going viability and staffing stability. They are therefore more inclined to seek the expertise and involvement of community members and service organizations through necessity. At the same time, school involvement in community-building activities accentuates a two-way dependency, with schools being institutions providing local employment and consumption of many goods and services alongside the provision of physical resources such as meeting places, sports venues, and a location for the integration of many community services.

One cluster of schools is establishing a combined administrative bureau, hiring multi-skilled personnel to manage communications, finances, maintenance works, co-operative purchasing, and to service co-operating school councils:

The best idea we've put into practice ... is to hire expertise to do some of the difficult and time-consuming things through our admin bureau....

We prepared a list of all the things that need to be done ... and have shared the costs of hiring people to do them. Grounds and maintenance, finance people, people to do newsletters.... If we get people who can turn their hand to many things and are willing to travel – all the better.

The bureau will also seek sponsorships and donations, acquiring and sharing community facilities, facilitating equipment exchanges, and lobbying for greater state and federal government support, including collaboration on submissions for special purpose funding. Comprehensive collaborations such as this one are making the running of schools more efficient and cost and time effective. One principal explained:

Our team share leadership tasks as far as we can – combined learning programs, administration stuff – finances and staffing and publicity – and then we set the whole year's calendar with things that we'll do together rather than on our own. The kids benefit and get excited about going to other schools and having visitors. We know a lot more about each other's schools and many heads are better at solving a problem.... We learn a lot from each other. There's benefits all round.

While there are limited hiring pools for specialist teachers and few full-time or permanent positions available, job sharing across schools is becoming common practice. Ancillary staff positions and emergency teachers are also mobile across schools. Although schools are one of the few sources of employment in small rural locations, when availability becomes an issue, schools cooperate to attract recruits to multi-school positions from elsewhere in the state. Retirees with all manner of skills and experiences are being used to mentor, train, and fill-in.

Emerging collaborative governance structures are appearing across clusters of schools. While each school retains its own active council, they instigate regular combined council meetings and planning days with other district schools, as the following principal explains:

Our councils meet regularly with the principals. We're all small and vulnerable and feel more powerful as a larger group. We have a district focus and the regional office has been quite supportive – they send people to talk about specific topics.... Sometimes we get guest speakers to see how they can help us.... [The] community spirit is boosted. Planning is more organized – more exciting – really positive things have happened.

Combined leadership amongst principals, school councils, and education department officers enables schools to engage future scenario planning, to share expertise, and to devise combined strategic plans to affect community

educational provision—including making decisions about what is educationally viable and what is not. Communities are, therefore, working towards enhancing the services and provisions of entire regions by taking a prospective view of educational and other human services needs across whole districts (Country Education Project, 2007). School planning is spanning Preparatory to Year 12, and in some cases includes co-located pre-schooling and health provisions.

Rural community development plans are commencing, requiring the services of community builders and “boundary-crossers” (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, 2001). A principal explains:

You rely on people’s goodwill and sense of community. Small places like ours need people who put in, otherwise small towns die.... It’s surprising how much a group can do – and if you can’t do it, someone will know someone who can and rope them in.... We’ve looked at education from birth right through so no kid loses out from living out here – that’s the main goal ... and the same for health services. It’s a different culture [than in city schools] – there’s a benefit for everyone involved.

Several clusters of principals participating in the leadership professional development program made use of university expertise to devise, collate, and interpret statistical and qualitative research data. Principals are being strategic in using evidence-based information to attract further funds and resources or as the basis for collaborative curriculum developments. Many rural schools made special arrangements to attract student teachers during their compulsory trainee teaching rounds. We became aware of student and teacher exchanges, widespread volunteer engagements, and flexible configurations of school timetables being implemented to enable such exercises. There are also collaborative efforts to attract enrollments through public relations and promotion exercises and public information meetings.

Educational capacity is being built alongside community development so that sustainability replaces fear about school closures. Local people already feel their communities are under-served, the hardest hit by climatic events and abandoned by governments and industries, but still in need of excellent education provision. The collective resistance of rural communities, fighting to keep their local services including resistance against efficiencies and economies of scale, is viewed as a necessity.

Falk and Mulford (2001) argue that distributed, participatory forms of leadership and decision-making enable a shared vision, in contrast to traditional forms of leadership concentrated on the solitary individual with a singular vision in a stand-alone setting. However, it appears that collaborative clustered leadership requires community builders—individuals who have the ability to communicate

ideas and goals to provide links between people, organizations, and projects to create change and renewal towards collective goals. These individuals enhance school-community programs and collaborations. A variety of formal and informal leaders and leadership styles contribute to the effectiveness of collaborations within and across schools. It is very evident that successful small rural principals are community builders who make strong partnerships with community operatives.

Many principals highlighted the special affinity they have with the community via issues concerning environmental protection and beautification projects. We evidenced a large number of cross-disciplinary environmental and cultural or community-building projects in the curriculum of small rural schools. For example, a common goal is for schools to engage with an emerging ecological economy, harnessing human and natural capital. One principal explained how his school takes responsibility for a localized environmental cause:

Our kids look after our section of the river – recording wildlife evidence, keeping the habitat clean, checking for pollution, and alerting the authorities. It’s a funded community project.... The students are very keen – really interested in their environment and climate change and how it’s affecting us here.

In this way, there is a recursive positive relationship between small rural schools, their communities, and the environment. There is concern that a new class of problems has been created through climatic change, with country regions bearing the brunt of its negative effects, which are insolvable through the practices that created them.

Small rural schools are readily using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to connect them to worldwide sources of expertise for learning programs, professional support agencies, blogs, government officers, and to each other. ICTs are essential resources in these contexts:

You absolutely rely on technology – couldn’t do without it. Webcams are great. You need to be connected and in touch with the world.... Our cluster meets in person and virtually to save time and travel.

Distance learning opportunities through ICTs allow broader curriculum options and are paramount to enable the transmission of lessons for students and meetings for teachers, school councilors, parents, and students (Schafft, & Bridger, 2006).

Through their collaborations and collective efforts, all schools benefit. Collaborative enterprise across small rural schools makes significant sense when unearthing the pressing challenges confronting their principals.

Summary

We are left with several conclusions from this research. The most obvious is that context matters. Principals of small rural schools face distinctive challenges such that what works for Melbourne (population 3.6 million) does not necessarily work for Murrumbidgee (population 1,000). The principals in this study highlight how one-size-fits-all education policy and practices often disadvantage them, while there is also a general lack of policy or provision that relates specifically to small rural schools. Resultant challenges are generating new distinctive rural leadership responses and collaboratively derived outcomes.

Globalization is radically changing rural life in Australia, in both positive and negative ways. It has integrative community-building effects, as well as effects of rural degeneration and further rural-metropolitan polarization. While some rural regions have experienced economic growth, most have experienced economic decline and subsequent social problems. Globalization has brought about new inequalities.

Principals of small rural schools believe that their working conditions have deteriorated and that they have subsequently been relegated to the lower strata of the education employment hierarchy. Simultaneously, globalization has enabled worldwide communications and information access. We note that the experiences we cite in this article are not unique to Australia, as globalization and neo-liberalism have shaped and are shaping similar educational policies and practices in many places including, for example, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

Small rural schools are not immune from macro and meso influences of policy and the micro impacts of structural reforms. However, the challenges faced by all school principals appear to be amplified in rural areas, in particular, work intensification, role diversity, and school viability have more dramatic effects. Small rural principals are fully aware that while recent reforms focus on the core business of teaching and learning and are holding them accountable for improvements, in contradictory fashion their time is taken up with ever-increasing externally imposed administrative requirements that frustrate these efforts. Hence new reforms are viewed as counterproductive in the current policy context. There is agreement, however, that improved student learning outcomes should be the focus of educational leaders.

This conflict for principals is rooted in the inimicality of their educational beliefs with the fundamental philosophical changes and concomitant alienating leadership practices that have arisen on the wave of market-driven forces in education. Structural reforms have created a demarcation between those who have the power to control and develop broad policy decisions and policy implementers at the school

level who are managed and marginalized. The principalship has been reinvented through the global market hegemony and mediated through policy at the public level. Small rural principals believe that their opinions and concerns are silenced, their voices ignored, and their plight abandoned.

Rural decline alongside structural reforms and connective technologies are creating new rural principalship practices with the involvement of a range of community players. In order to best service their schools and to help themselves, small rural principals are turning to each other and their communities for support and collaboration in conducting their complex roles. There are many emerging moves afoot for addressing issues of smallness and rurality. Small rural schools are enhanced by strong community linkages and the attendant shared school-community leadership practices. These have arisen through informal, locally-derived, and pragmatic means. Many people play an important part in running small rural schools in which leadership is increasingly viewed as a collective community responsibility in an environment of diminishing and more tightly controlled resources. Hence, paraprofessionals or willing amateurs take on a greater significance in small rural schools, assisting with all manner of activities. Small rural principals have to be cognizant of, and diplomatic in using, localized formal and informal power structures to get things done.

We are witnessing a trend towards collaborative councils that oversee education and other social services within a whole district. These groups of volunteers are concerned about developing and preserving broad coverage of educational provision from pre-school to post school education, alongside other social service provisions within their geographical location. These groups have not replaced individual school councils but are evolving as an adjunct to them. Larger, combined governance structures assist in overcoming the usual limitations of smallness, rurality, and resource scarcity. School principals are pivotal players in these groups, with their involvement taking school leadership into the realms of community leadership.

In order for education and other social services to survive and thrive, local rural people are making the best of their new circumstances and the challenges they bring. According to principals, these collaborative arrangements should be supported actively and systemically with formal recognition and funding. These partnerships are proving to be of benefit for communities, schools, students, and small rural principals in tough times. Small rural principals understand that performing in their jobs is not just about what they do, but how they do it.

As a result of this study, we would recommend that Australian federal and state governments fund further investigation into, and special support for, small rural school principals, encouraging new forms of governance,

resource allocation, community engagement, and distributed leadership practices with the aim of enhancing leadership, teaching, student learning, school effectiveness, and educational provision in small rural contexts.

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