

THE 'VOICES' OF RURAL WOMEN TEACHERS

Barry Cocklin
Jane Mitchell
Jenny Gurtner
Kennece Coombe

Charles Sturt University, Riverina
School of Education
WAGGA WAGGA
NSW 2678

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this paper, we report from a research project in progress therefore the material discussed is still tentative and draws upon initial data gathered. The intention of such a presentation, therefore, is primarily to stimulate some discussion and reflection upon the research process and the particular focus of the 'voices' of rural women teachers. While many areas of education have been the subject of both theoretical analysis and research investigation, teachers have often been taken for granted. Indeed, Connell (1985:2) remarked that:

The 'new sociology of education' that emerged in the 1970s made giant strides with problems like the schools' relation to the economy and the class bases of educational knowledge but I had curiously little to say about teachers.

This situation has remained relatively 'unchallenged', certainly in the extent to which consideration is given to the possibilities that teachers also exist with personal biographies, exhibiting political, class, and gender relations (see, Lawn & Grace, 1987), with the result that: ...we still know comparatively little about how teachers experience and organise their work situation. We know little about their ideological and pedagogical commitments, how these are influenced and formed and what effects they have upon teachers' work in schools and upon their occupational satisfactions. In short, our understanding of the culture and politics of the workplace, from the teacher's perspective, is still at an elementary level. (Lawn & Grace:viii)

As the most numerous (see, Maclean, 1992) of the occupational groups having a so-called professional or semi-professional (Etzioni, 1969; Purvis, 1973) status in society, and one which, certainly at Primary level, is dominated by women (see, Logan et al., 1989; McKenzie, 1991; & Sampson,

1991), there appears considerable justification for continuing investigation and analysis of this group. Furthermore, given that the nature and processes of the teaching and learning context depends to a large extent upon the characteristics of teachers (see, Maclean & McKenzie, 1991; Maclean, 1992), we need to continue to delve into the multifaceted ways in which biography and praxis interrelate. The focus, then, is upon teachers' yet this cannot be applied as a generalised category'. As Seddon (1991) argues, we need to recognise that teacher' is a social phenomenon, and not a delimiting category providing us with specific attributes. In other words, impinging upon the person a' of teacher' is an idiosyncratic nexus of prior and current biographical, interpersonal, and relationship factors, including personal background and experiences along with

influences deriving from the wider social, ideological, political, and structural contexts of both person and context. Moreover, for the present investigation, these influences and factors are impacted upon by gender effects deriving from both the personal and wider societal aspects which constitute and construct women's lives and careers (see, Sampson, 1991). As with the category of 'teacher', the notion of rural' is one often taken as a generalised concept, implying all too often the inferior status of non-urban' (see, Meyenn, Sinclair & Squires, 1991). Accordingly, the approach adopted needs to recognise that 'rural' and urban' are references to variations in respect of population size and density, the issues of distance and isolation from a range of social, cultural and economic goods and services, and in terms of the economic base and cultural affiliations of locations. Further, there is no simple dichotomy whereby any one location can be clearly differentiated in terms of these notions of 'rural' and 'urban' as perhaps similarities and differences are more individualised than susceptible to generalisation. In short, 'rural' is a relative term where meaning needs to be defined in the context of a particular situation (see, Stevens, 1994). This should not be taken to imply that 'teaching' is the same across context, as:

...teaching in rural Australia is not the same as teaching in metropolitan Australia. Rural teaching has special characteristics and qualities which make demands on teachers, especially on those who are young and at the beginning of their careers. (Meyenn, et al, 1991:156),
In particular, there may be an even greater difference in the experienced 'culture' for male and female teachers in a context where patriarchal beliefs and values may be even more predominant than in the urban situation (see, Henry, 1989; Stevens, 1994). However, underpinning the current investigation is also the view that countering gender bias throughout the education system is more than focussing upon issues of access to curriculum materials by female students. We need to examine more closely the ways in

which sex stereotyping influences every aspect of school life, affecting women teachers as well as pupils (see, Migniuolo & De Lyon, 1989). In order to undertake such a process, greater details are needed as to the ways in which women teachers implement their praxis, and the interrelationships between this and their biography. Certainly, more is required than the generalised statements often encountered in the literature where 'assumptions' are made that 'teacher' equates with 'he', thereby further devaluing the idea that women have teaching careers':

The nature of the career pattern that develops for any particular individual over his working life is the outcome of the often subtle interplay that occurs between the objective and subjective aspects of his career. (Maclean, 1992:79, emphasis added). Then this position is exacerbated by the author utilising data which reports 'teacher' comments, often without identifying the gender of the respondent. Perhaps unconsciously, but nevertheless insidiously it becomes further 'evidence' that the notions of 'women' and 'careers' are 'incompatible', that the notion of 'career' is an exclusive term to be applied to male teachers. Accordingly, the particular experiences and realities which may be faced and lived by women teachers become further invisible, and women teachers become further marginalised from the hierarchical and patriarchal power relationships in all aspects of education, from teacher education to promotion. In many instances, this becomes seen as a 'natural' phenomenon, established through the dominant patriarchal hegemony within

society, and manifested through presumptions that the 'early' years of education are the 'natural' domain of women due to their 'nurturant role' (see, Byrne, 1978; Lee, 1987). These perceptions are then reinforced through teacher education (see, Leonard, 1989) where even courses which discuss issues of gender and stereotyping may not change perceptions, attitudes and behaviour:

If students are allowed to feel that they have 'done' equal opportunities or gender issues, in one course or another, without realizing that these issues reach into their own biographies, their present experiences, and their future careers, then little will have been achieved. (Aspinwall & Drummond, 1989:17) This view of the importance of 'biography' as a source of influence upon teachers' work, and the continuing manifestations upon praxis and person, have underpinned a variety of recent investigations into the lives and careers of teachers (for instance, Nias, 1989; Ball & Goodson, 1985; Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985; Hatton, 1994; Britzman, 1986). Indeed, Butt and Raymond (1987) have argued that the empowering potential of biography may contribute to opposing aspects of the devaluation of teachers and their sense of worth experienced in recent times

(see, Woods, 1991). Others (for instance, Goodson, 1991) have urged that we seek to provide a focus on teacher lives rather than practice, and use this to 'sponsor' the teacher 'voice' through research (see, Schratz, 1993; Cocklin & Retallick, 1994). Middleton (1987) utilised biographical approaches to highlight the ways in which life histories can illustrate and sharpen the radicalizing effects of critical incidents. These, and a number of other studies, have illustrated the power of the life history or biography as a method in investigating teacher thought and practice. Yet, while there has been an increase in consideration of the issue of gender in relation to the work experience of teachers (see, Woods, 1990), although much less in terms of rural contexts, this has been overshadowed, certainly within the political realm, by the main focus being upon the educational experiences of children (see, Leonard, 1989). But even here, recent pronouncements from the Minister of Education in NSW (Virginia Chadwick) have presaged a 'change' in focus from the educational experiences of girls to that of boys. Many aspects of the so-called 'New Managerial' approach underpinning educational reform run counter to promoting both gender as a broad issue and women teachers' careers as a specific issue (for example, Al-Khalifa, 1989; Blackmore, 1989; Gray, 1989; Lee et al, 1993; Coombe et al 1993). On the other hand, the focus in an increasing domain of feminist writing has sought to pay particular attention to the history, consciousness and experiences of women teachers. This brings to the fore issues such as the nature of gender relations, patriarchal structures and practices, relations of power, issues of biography and praxis, notions of class and gender relations of teaching, and many others (for instance, Lawn & Grace, 1989; De Lyon & Mignuolo, 1989; Sikes et al., 1985).

The 'life history' approach adds to our perceptions as it is..placing the people, personalities and events behind the situations, strategies and processes into the centre of the research enterprise. Teachers, I have argued, should not be treated as if they are cardboard cut-outs: behind teaching lies a range of attitudes, motives and emotions, and life history material can tell us much about the socio, historical, institutional and personal influences on a career. (Beynon, 1985:176)

The study, at present, involves three women teachers ranging across both age and career experience located at one rural school. This school, in a town of approximately 4500 population, has a roll of 345 pupils. It is one of two State primary schools in the town, along with 1 Catholic school and State secondary school. The town is located approximately 100 kilometres from the nearest regional centre. Accordingly, while 'rural' location is one of the definitions we have adopted, and indeed which the

local community use to describe their situation, we are not seeking to establish this as a 'typical', or even 'representative' rural context. However, the School Profile document notes that the school...is set in a rural community where traditional family, moral and work values are evident. Most parents view education and schooling as very important. The local community is described in the same source as 'aged' with a growing number of low, income and unemployed, with an increasing number of people being dependent upon pensions. The community has a strong sporting tradition, but offers few opportunities for cultural experiences. As such, these aspects reflect the economic climate of the early nineties, and are currently exacerbated by the drought severely impacting on the local region. Many families are experiencing financial difficulties, there is a reducing range of employment opportunities in the local area, and increasingly both parents are working either full or part time. Single parent or blended families are becoming more common in the area, along with those moving out of the cities seeking cheaper accommodation and/or work opportunities. The main school building is a very old, historic building with structural problems beginning to appear. The grounds are limited, playing space is fragmented, and much of the area is tarsealed restricting play opportunities. Nearly 30% of the students come from outside the township from farming properties or small villages. The dominant ethnic group is Anglo-Celtic, with few Aboriginal or other minority ethnic groups being represented. The majority complete their secondary education within the town, and some progress on to the local TAFE as the only tertiary institution available. The staff are described in the School Profile as:...a generally experienced staff. Many are long term residents of the town, most owning their own homes in the town and showing a willingness to stay in the town for a length of time. The full-time staff of 14 comprise the male Principal, a male Assistant Principal (Primary), a female Assistant Principal (Infants), 1 female Executive teacher, and ten women classroom teachers. There are also two part-time women teachers, one being the teacher, librarian, and one the Support Teacher Learning Difficulties both of whom are available 3 days per week. Including the women who form the administrative staff, cleaning staff, a Teacher's Aide (Special) and a general assistant, 92% of the staff are female and most are married. In many of these aspects, then, the staff fit the 'typical' profile of both primary school and rural context (see, Meyenn et al., 1991; Sampson, 1991; Stevens, 1994).

From the outset, one of the intentions for the investigation was to act as a 'learning exercise' in the application of the generally described 'life history' methodology (see, for instance, Douglas, et al, 1988). This is not to suggest that the researchers were 'unfamiliar' with the approach, as certainly

three members had extensive experience in the general area of ethnographic interviewing, and of working with women participants. The fourth, however, had no research experience, yet a strong desire to develop not only the research skills but

to focus on the particular issue of rural women teachers. Being in her third year as a teacher, all spent at this particular school, many of the experiences and issues she was concerned about as both a woman and her rural situation provided an impetus and direction for the research. Certainly, then, part of the agenda was to provide her with an opportunity to gain both insight and skills, and in this sense the biography of the researcher, indeed applying to all members of the team, is of considerable importance in the conduct of any inquiry (see, Roberts, 1994). A second part of the research agenda reflected our concerns regarding our roles in teacher education. Although all three of us are involved in teaching gender issues, and to students who are more likely to teach in rural contexts, we felt our knowledge of their possible experiences once out teaching could only add to the courses we teach (see, Aspinwall & Drummond, 1989). Accordingly, both content and methodology of biography were seen as areas of direct impact for our own teaching, while recognising that the present research could only provide a 'point of departure'. The method adopted, therefore, followed the 'open-ended' interview strategies (see, for instance, Measor, 1985; Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1984; Riddell, 1989; Simons, 1989). These were to be conducted with voluntary participants, at times and locations of their choice, with tape recordings made given participant agreement, and with proforma consent and research intention information provided (see, for instance, Burgess, 1989; Cocklin, 1989). As with much research, there are those differences which occur between intentions and reality. In this case, we had intended completing the initial interviews during term 3 and using term 4 to do follow up discussions and observations. First, however, the university ethics committee took over two months to provide approval which left us at the end of term 3 before we could 'officially' negotiate access and set dates for interviews. As this was a busy time for two of the participants, the initial interviews did not take place until term 4, and we are yet to conduct the further discussions and observations. The selection of three participants was guided purely by the exigencies of time and resources. The provision of a small seeding grant precluded extensive travel, finding the time to conduct interviews with people who have busy careers and personal lives is always a difficulty, and we had always seen this as an 'initial study' to refine both methods and determine some of the central issues. All members of the group, researchers and participants, although hopefully the 'distinction' is more one

of 'academic convention' than reality, met together for an informal lunch prior to the research. This was partly for issues of rapport, but more to allow the participants to ask us questions regarding ourselves and the research. Throughout we have adopted the notion that 'quality' research involves a 'sharing' process (see, Oakley, 1981; Reinharz, 1984). The initial interviews were conducted at the school during lunch time, participants selecting this as the convenient time and location, although both privacy and 'interruptions' did prove somewhat problematic on some occasions. These interviews were conducted by two of the women researchers, one of whom was the teacher-researcher, partly in recognition of some of the feminist literature, but also as an issue of convenience of time and access.

It is intended that the follow-up discussions and observations will involve all members of the research team, indeed, all participants have issued invitations to the team to come into my class anytime'. Indeed, the male researcher has already spent

considerable time in the class of one participant and the teacher-researcher, but on matters aside from the particular focus of the research. At this point, then, the three initial interviews have been conducted and just transcribed. Each participant will shortly be given a copy of their transcribed interview, and this will provide part of the next phase of discussion and elaboration

The intention here is to provide an indication as to what these teachers are saying', and to do so in the initial and original form, as devoid of imposed interpretation as possible, yet space alone produces a need for selection.

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†' ") D O &"q)&&&Ux00 &"q)&3&&"q0Y

Y Teacher A is in her second year out, and has been in the town for sixteen months having
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Dpreviously done some casual work in the Regional Centre and a few days a week in a small two-teacher school. The reasons for her present position are:

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Öïï...because I got job here. It is only a casual job but its been full,time work since I have beenD ,E&.

There as it is a maternity leave position so if I wasn't doing this I would be doing day,to,dayIcasual teaching , quite depressing , so I

have been really lucky so far.††Dê-x(0äÏ!äÏ!

DIThis notion of 'luck' referred to her permanent' position compared to some of her ex,colleaguesIfrom Teacher Education who were still doing 'day,by,day' casual work, often at different schools andIin different locations.ID

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D Reflecting back on her University time, Teacher A reported:Ö8

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ÖïïI suppose like most people when I came out of Uni I was full of ideas and I still am but theyD

Dhave all changed. I don't think I was very well prepared at Uni but then again I don'tIknow if you can ever be prepared. I really think now that you go to Uni to get a certificateIand you come out to learn how to do it.††D 8äÏ!äÏ!

DIShe also reported that in one particular subject she had been encouraged, with her peers, to criticallyIreflect upon their teacher education course and:Ö8

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ÖïïThat is one of the arguments that I remember at Uni. I did Literacy, I did Maths and I don'tD

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Dthink I was well prepared for literacy. Maths was OK. I considered So

ciology to be reallyIimportant and it still is. The main thing I got from that was to stop and look at things andIask why are they going on, what is the purpose of those and I consider that really importantIfor my teaching now. I am at the stage now where I do it with myself and with m

my classroom. I have not the confidence yet to do it with other people and at staff meetings but think I will get there. ... I am stopping and asking why and I am reflecting on things and considering why I am doing them.

In reflecting back on her decision to enter teaching, Teacher A commented:

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I always wanted to be a teacher, you know now when you are little and you are playing girly

games and you always played teachers and all the other kids were students well I was always the teacher. I don't know what influenced me back then but it was an early influence. changed my mind a bit through Year 11 and 12. I was unsure what I wanted to do. haven't got some amazing reason, some underlying force that made me want to be a teacher I just always wanted to and I don't really know why.

Born and raised in the Regional centre, no other members of her family are teachers, and her two brothers are both economists. Her family supported her decision to enter teaching:

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You get the usual offer from your Mum and Dad, they think it's lovely because you will be able to

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have babies and still go back to teaching and the boys, who are meant to be quite open minded, they both said 'yes, that's a very good occupation for a girl', but that is not why I chose teaching. [Not because] It's one of those pleasant little girly occupations!!!

When asked to elaborate, Teacher A acknowledged the dominance of women in teaching, but did not consider the only reason being that "you are female and you are going to have babies one day and

you can always go back to it". Among the reasons when a stud

ent, Teacher A reported that peersD

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Dhad noted the holidays', salaries', the 9,3.30' with recess and lunch', but suggested that realities may have changed such perceptions once in the school. In short, Teacher A felt there were a

variety of idiosyncratic reasons, although the time to further explore these issues will be in the subsequent phase of the study.

In terms of a career, Teacher A also suggested that it was not for ever':08

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es, it is really the only thing I have ever wanted to do and I am really glad that I did it. ID

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Ddon't think I will do it for ever. Sometimes I think that in ten years down the track I could see myself changing occupation and doing something else. I don't know [why]. At this [present] stage y

ou are young and fresh and you are doing all those things, but I think after ten years, maybe five for me, might be twenty for you but some people just get stale and they just do the same thing over and over again and that is not really giving much to the kids.¢¢D]0

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DI The rural' aspect of her career, including her living in the town, was also commented upon:D

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ÖiiI often think about working in Sydney and the thought scares

me. I don't know why ,D

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Dperhaps here you get to know everyone, parents, not all of them but most of them, you get to know people's circles and I enjoy that. When I was in [X] which is only a two-teacher school, that was a bit too small, everyone knew everything. I really enjoy it here, yes. .. we always lived in the country, I have always lived in [Regional Centre] or around [there]. I have never spent a great deal of time up there [

Sydney]. I have just never had the experience , one day I will have to
and that will probably be a good thing for me but just at the moment I feel
safer in the country where I know how things work. ... I know all about
the country, I have done all my pracs in the country. I have taught
in the country. I don't know about the differences in the city , maybe
that's what is the frightening thing.

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Teacher A also contrasted the ease' with which she had fitted into
the local community with another teacher of similar age who had moved
from Sydney:

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She was having a really hard time , she was really
lonely, really down about things , hated

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the country, could not understand this and that. She is now just
getting herself involved [e.g., in sport] and she can see just how much
easier it is if you do it yourself. Nobody is going to come to your door.

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Finally, Teacher A was asked to reflect upon any critical incidences'
that had influenced her teaching practices:

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When I was on prac I had two particular prac teachers who were legendary .
I would love to
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be like them. They were both male. But they were both very
(not to say that my other practeachers were not good) but these two
just stood out. They were both so relaxed in their readings, the atmosphere
was relaxed and that is what I try to achieve. There was jokes going
on here and there and there was so much learning , kids were not afraid
to ask questions or put their hands up.... That is the sort of classroom
that I would like to have. I.... ä!ä!

In terms of 'bad experiences', Teacher A remarked upon her

own schooling:08

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I can still remember my sixth grade teacher and that is something I often think about and itD
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Dwas all work off the board, all very structured, you know there is a place for structure and think about his method, his voice, his t
one stayed the same all day and I look back and think I would never, ever want to be like that.¢¢D0#`\$äÏ!äÏ!

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&&Ux0Y

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Y Teacher B graduated from a coastal NSW CAE in 1979, having been raised in a small NorthD
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DCoast country town. Following some time doing a variety of jobs, she obtained a permanent positionIin a small Queensland school in the e
arly 1980's, teaching there for 2 years, prior to moving to theIpresent Region in 1987. The reason for the move was that a friend in Queensland had informed herIthat jobs were available in this Region, and after some casual work, both Primary and Secondary, inIa number of different centres, she moved to the present school and has had a permanent teachingI
p
osition there for five years. Her early experiences in Queensland were t
he focus of her initialIcomments:08

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0ÏÏIt was a coal mining town and [everyone] wanted to get out of so it was pretty easy to get aD
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Djob. There was accommodation there for single women but it was a mining town in Queensland so there was no other accommodation for anyone but single miners, teachers, miners and their families or people like post office and banking people. As I was in a de facto relationship and he

is a carpenter...there was nowhere for us to live...so I said to them if I get married do I get married accommodation and they said no because it would have to be

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be the male who is the breadwinner as the teacher. I was rejected accommodation because I was a female, even if I had married then.

DI While noting some regrets about having to leave Queensland, as she would have preferred a permanent job on the coast, the problems of accommodation saw her seeking to return to NSW, eventually arriving in the local region as "I wouldn't have ever become a permanent teacher within

8 NSW if I had not come here".

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DI In deciding to become a teacher, she noted the influence of coming from a family of teachers:

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ÖI always wanted to be. Maybe because my father was a teacher. We lived at a school. D

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DWhen I left College I thought I did not want to do this....great I did not want a job but I'm glad I did not go from school, college, school, I don't think that is good for you. That's another perception people have that all teachers know about is school which a lot of teachers do only know about school.

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DI However, this family influence' was also reported in terms of her teaching practice:

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ÖI My father was a teacher and a lot of

f people in my family are teachers and I reckon thatD

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Dsomehow you just absorb it and you can do it. I reckon some peopl
e are born teachersIalthough I'm not saying that I am but I feel that it
is automatic. I can't put it all down inIwords and sentences and proce
dures , I can't do that and yet all these people who can areInot necessa
rily good teachers.D

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DφI Her teacher education was not remembered with any affec
tion':Ö8

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ÖïïI did not remember anything that I had learnt at College , t
hat's what I mean about beingD
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Dautomatic. I didn't remember anything from College , I didn't l
ike College. Not the CollegeIpart of it. Because a lot of the lecturer
s have been out of the classroom too long and also aIlot of lecturers ha
ve not even been in the classroom so they don't know what they are talki

ngIabout. Some of them seemed pissed and stoned half the time. Or if th
at is the way reallyIbrainy people act , I don't know , they don't seem
t
o be in the real world.φD},ä!ä!

DI In terms of the rural aspect, and reflecting her i
ntentions to leave the town and school at the endIof the year, Teacher B
was very emphatic that relationships and contacts between community and
Iteachers were poor:Ö8

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ÖïïI mean, good things have happened here but I
am ready to leave , I am sick of it. I amD
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Dfinding it very oppressive. Just those parents who ring yo
u up about swimming andIcomplaining they don't appreciate what you
do for their kids , there is the feeling inIthese communities that teac
hers get all these holidays, they get all this pay, they get maternityIa
nd we [community] don't get anything, we're just 'bloody' farmers and we

've got a drought and you know, that's it. If you live here I have just got myself more withdrawn more and more into our own house. You don't have the hassle of being cornered down the street, 'what's little Johnny up to?' and if you go out at night the parents hounding you down in the pub or wherever. No adults of our age go out in [town], there's nowhere to go out except the pubs and so you think to yourself I'd like to go out once in a while but you are confronted with all these bloody kids you taught, there's no one else there, no one our age there. ¶¶D0-, (¶¶!ä!ä!

This perception was also evident in the terms Teacher B used to express the perception teachers' had within the community: ¶8

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¶¶The
y don't accept teachers into the town. A lot of teachers think they are but they are not ¶

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¶because they don't hear what they are saying about us. I used to go to Playgroup. God it was horribler. I couldn't go because they just wanted to talk to me about what [their children] do, you'd say you didn't want to talk about that and they would get the shits and I just walk off. You are not a person, you are just a teacher. ¶¶DU ä!ä!

In similar vein, Teacher B expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the lack of 'appreciation' from the community for teacher efforts, such as on excursions and sporting events. Whether this was a 'local', 'rural', or 'general' issue she was uncertain, but did note that the local community were very 'conservative' in their outlook. This was evident in two statements Teacher B made. First: ¶8

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¶¶They do get stuck into very regimental things, like I wanted to change Year 5. They are ¶

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Dgoing to [camp] and I wanted to change it. Well, no 'we have been doin
g that for years'. I.... And they have to do the same thing over and ov
er again or they don't feel comfortable,Irelaxed. 'That's not the way w
e do it here, so don't you dare come in here and try andIchange anything
' . It's not the teachers in the school , it's the parents...¢¢D
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DThe other issue concerned her personal life where Teacher B was the
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eadwinner' with her partnerIstaying at home to look after their children
. This issue' was raised when both of them attended aImeeting to seek
Accreditation for the local Child Care facility, and found themselves o
ne of the onlyItwo couples' present, the remainder being women who wer
e complaining' that their husbands hadIhad to get their own meals and
l
ook after the children because the meeting had been held at anIinconveni
ent time. Teacher B noted that this conservatism' of gender roles m
ade both her and herIpartner uncomfortable' and added to both their se
nse of isolation' in the community and their desireIto leave the town.
On the other hand, there appeared to be a sense of tension' in term
s of suchIrelationships, particular in her comments on both her own pers
onal feelings and her teaching practice:Ö8

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ÖiiWell I have said this to
you that before I had children all these women used to say that ID

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Dwould be a better teacher once you have children. I said 'what a lo
ad of garbage' , but it'sItrue. You look at children , like you l
ove your own children so much like you never feltIlike you would feel li
ke that so you start to think like that about.... I can't explain it ,
j
ust aImothering thing though. Yes, a primary teacher thing.¢¢D≠P
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DIYet, and further suggesting a degree of tension' and perhaps contr
adiction', and an issue to exploreIfurther in subsequent discussions, Te
acher A also noted:Ö8

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Öïï...and that's why the men have always been at
the top and that is why they are starting toD
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Dfeel threatened now because women are not staying in the position
of classroom mother , theyIare trying to move and men are making it ver
y difficult , saying 'you're abrasive, difficult'Iyou are this and that.
You don't belong up here with us , that's what he [Principal] said toI

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e , 'you are abrasive'.¶¶ D9&ä 'äÏ!äÏ!
DIThis situation had arisen over an application for an AST posi
tion Teacher B made:Ö8

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ÖïïI am a classroom teacher and in this system y
ou get very little recognition for that. We areD
>)J\$+

Dthe ones who do all the work and we get no recognition. No, I t
ried to go for my AST , I feltI[Principal] would support me , he more or
less said it when I went for an interview situationIwhich I completely
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reaked out in. I could not ask the questions. I could not do it and I
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idI not get it and supposedly it is not based on interview but it is. ..
Executive staff, Teacher B continued] Now thatIwas illegal and [DSE re
presentative] told me to put in an appeal but I said to [Principal] if I
Iput in an appeal is it going to be the same sort of thing and he said '
yes'. 'Why?' He saidI'because you have an abrasive personality and I a
m not going to [support you]. That is whatIhe said so I thought well st
uff you. I like [Principal] , he is good but that's what heIwants
. He wants submissive women and that's what they want. That's what all
these maleD

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Dteachers , but I have a feeling that a lot of male teac
hers will start getting very threatened.¶¶ DQäÏ!äÏ!

DITeacher B then went on to cite other instances where as other w
omen teachers became moreI assertive' the Principal distanced himself f
rom them. A final group' of comments made by Teacher A reflected

upon aspects of the 'isolation' of rural life and the 'conservative'
aspects of both the community and, at least potentially, the school.

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If you were in a bigger centre, you have to have a day off here to go to
[Regional Centre] to

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Talk to your employer or your employer representative. What about
JG and the phones, she was going to make us pay for ringing [Regional
Centre], and I said 'Judy, there is no way that I am going to pay money
to ring to talk to my employer'. But I can't help it if my employer is
removed from my workplace. If you have children you have to

have a lot of association with the Department of Social Security, they
don't have that here, they don't even send anyone over anymore and when
they did, it was during working time because they think the only people
in [town] who use them are people on the dole, it's not true. So,
if you are both working, someone has to take the day off to go over and
see all about that.

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You know if they get all these kids that are just going to be
farmer's wives that have grown up here, they are very mono-cultural.

They are just going to get more and more [racist] and can see [town] just
drilling itself into the ground, figuratively speaking. They must all
be marrying people who are related to them. They must be getting to
that point.

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A lot of the teachers here have gone to this school. They have all got their mothers, they have all got their grand(bloody)mothers, it is amazing. They are going to end up here with teachers who have been born here, raised here and gone to this school and that is not good.

The school, the town is closed and insular now without all the teachers being married to farmers as well. They hardly get any other perspective on life now so if no one new is going to come here and be a teacher they are not going to do anything and then like I said, you go out there [town] and they are all pregnant to kids they went to pre-school with, married to kids they went to pre-school with, their whole lives [in the one town].

This, Teacher B felt, was exacerbated by the lack of both cultural and social services in the town, which increased the insular nature.

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Teacher CY C y Y D

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Y Born and then raised on a farm some 30 kilometres from the town, trained at the Regional Centre
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Teachers College, and then with all her teaching career in the local area, Teacher C has spent the greater majority of her life close to the town. In addition, she married a local man at the end of her first two years teaching in a nearby two-teacher school, and since then, along with raising her own family, Teacher C has continued to teach, generally in casual positions, in the local region, spending the greatest amount of time at the study school. At present, and for a few recent years, she has been primarily on block casual, this year being a full block. Her entry to teaching she described as 'pretty simple':

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We applied for scholarships. My parents were on a farm and the farm was not going too

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Dwell at the time and they were prepared to put me through University but I felt they did not have the money to do that so when I was presented with a scholarship then that was what I chose to do because it would save my parents a lot of work. I really did want to do social work or journalism, these were the two favourites...but I found teaching presents opportunities to do both those, particularly social work at the moment, it's an area I would like to go into.

Her family were supportive.

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They were very pleased, very proud because at that time teachers were highly regarded and

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to have their daughter training as a teacher was something that was quite special and there were not many people from my class who succeeded to the level of being offered a scholarship for teaching. In a small country town a lot of the girls had already left school by then and were married and some of them even had children or had gone into secretarial positions which were to be short term. Probably only very few of us went on to any tertiary education at all so it was really regarded highly.

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When comparing then' and now', Teacher C remarked that teachers had:

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Bit of a lower status and I am not sure why. I have not been able to put my finger on that

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but somehow teachers don't seem to be as highly regarded as they were.

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think people and children are more aware of their rights and so (I think it's a power based thing) we can't have the power over people so they are not frightened of us any more. But we are certainly not as highly regarded as we used to be in the community even though we are involved in a lot of things still. We were expected to be at all the events in the town to represent the school and I don't think teachers do as much as that now but we are certainly involved in many things. Perhaps our profile is not as high and I think some teachers in this day and age don't present themselves as professionally as they have in the past, their dress, their way of presenting themselves in the community, of the image the people might have of them is certainly changed. There is a change in our society for a more casual approach to things. Teachers are probably more casual in their appearance or casual with their dealings with people in the community.

Another factor or concern Teacher C reported was the standard of teachers now:

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I am a bit concerned that the standard of teachers we get sometimes are (not that we get it)

There in particular) but that the student coming out into the teaching service is not of a quality that I would like them to be. When the marks got down to about half way in the HSC results and people were still able to train as teachers, I got very disturbed at that because in my day they were seen as failures and I could not imagine why failures as students were teaching my children at school.

Also of concern, but a different issue, was that of change within the system:

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I feel that the changes in schools have been a little bit too sudden. A lot of the older teachers don't dare not coping with the changes. I wonder if in fact I am almost a

damant in my belief thatIthe teachers that train at certain times should update themselves through some form of formalIstudy or assessment every few years...and that teachers who choose not to update themselvesIat th at time then they are at risk of holding their job. I feel that there a re too many teachersIwho are not prepared to advance themselves and take on board the new philosophies and toItry out the new ways and new findi ngs of research who should be penalised in some wayIbecause they are cer tainly penalising our children at school.¢¢DA(p#*äÏ!äÏ!

DIThis, perhaps, reflected her own recent tertiary studies for her B Ed, noting that this had seenIconsiderable change in her own teaching ph ilosophy and practices, particularly in the area of literacy. ndeed, a nd seen as a 'requisite' due to her 'casual' position in the system, T eacher C noted:Ö8

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ÖïïI have taken on responsibilities within the schoo l such as the Numeracy Course, such as anD

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Dinterest in the programs which are running within the school so t hat if it comes to anIinterview situation then I am hopeful that I will b e one step ahead of other casuals. So I amIthe more attractive package a nd which also means that I have to keep my teaching practicesIat a very h igh standard and I feel sometimes that I do much more recording and much moreIassessing than a lot of other teachers at the school because I hav e to prove, at any time, thatD

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DI am doing the things that are necessary , that I am up,to,da te with the curriculums, that am able to assess by outcomes, that I am able to do all the things that others are required toI do but mine have t o be more perfect in order to be competitive.¢¢D`äÏ!äÏ!

DI Reflecting the 'typical' pattern of many women teachers

, Teacher C has taken time off for raisingIa family, a situation which n ow sees her finding it difficult to re,enter the workforce in a permanen tIposition, at least in the local area, preferably at the present school :Ö8

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I am very keen to become a permanent teacher and to get back in to the workforce. I find that

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My children have grown up now and don't need me at home as such and I find housework extremely boring so I would rather get back into the workforce.

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In this aspect, Teacher C was able to reflect upon some of the 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' of being a woman teacher:

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It has been

an advantage to me because I have been able to get employment. Most towns

Have schools and if you establish yourself at the schools to show that in fact you are a reasonably capable person that can think and help and present and be prepared to do part of the work then I think it opens up an opportunity to get work. I guess being a woman is one disadvantage because I have taken time off and my chance to progress to higher levels has been stopped because I have had a number of years out of the teaching force. A friend of mine who I went through College with is now a principal at a school in Sydney and she has no children so she has been able to carry her teaching right through. She has been able to sit on a number of committees and boards...and so through that experience she has been able to get herself into quite a superior position in a very large school. That's not too bad by the age of forty.

The role of 'mother', however, Teacher C saw as 'important' in her own teaching practice, again reflecting perhaps aspects of the 'natural' role for the female primary teacher:

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ÖiiI find that I e
njoy teaching now much more than I did when I started out because I have
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Dbetter understanding of children now that I have had my own childr
en and I am much moreIpatient with the young children. I find hav
ing my own children has allowed me to try aIlot of strategies that I use
d in teaching with other people's children and I found that certainIstra
tegies worked very well with my own children when I was helping them wit
h formingIlanguage and numeracy ideas. This year I asked to go ba
ck to infants because I wouldIlike to try out some of the new concepts I
have learnt that I have been taking on board and find that I am enjoy
ing teaching the younger children which is quite a change from when fi
rst came out teaching when I did not enjoy teaching younger children at
a

ll , I had noIpatience for them but having my own children has taught me
patience and the understandingIto handle the younger children much bett
er.ϕϕD'A!(äI!äI!

DI Commenting upon the rural aspect, aside from noti
ng her own 'background' from the local area,ITeacher C suggested:Ö8

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he rural environment I guess has very supportive families, A little bit
different to some ofD
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Dthe city schools that my friends teach at where their childr
en don't have very much supportIfrom their families in fact parents ofte
n don't care in some of the middle suburban schools. IThey sent their ki
ds to school and you do what you can. In country areas the parents tend
toIbe very close to the school and tend to want to know what is going o
n. I am one of thoseIpeople so I assume there are a lot like me because
we have a lot of parent involvement at thisIschool. I think it has inf
luenced me to make sure that I explain to parents what I am doingIand to
let parents know what is happening to their children and I like them to
be aware of theIfact that they have a right to question what is happeni
ng with their children because they areD

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Dso involved. It is also an easy place to teach in a co
untry town because the children areIgenerally well behaved , they are ge
nerally well supported at home, they get encouragement,Ithey get reasona
bly sound food and so they are reasonably healthy. I think it is a heal

thyIenvironment to teach in without too many problems in the schools.¢¢D

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YSOME CONCLUDING COMMENT

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YI We have offered this initial data as a basis fo
r further discussion. Obviously, a number of issuesIpertaining to both
t
he gender and rural aspects of the study become evident as we read throu
gh theseIcomments from the participants. The next phase of the investig
ation is to follow these up further,Iwhile at the same time reflecting u
pon both the content and methodology. Certainly, members of theIresarc
h team would welcome any comment.IY, lòYi

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