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**Bush Tracks:  
Exploring Rural Teaching  
Transitions**

**The Bush Tracks Research  
Collective**

**University of New England**

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**Bush Tracks:  
Exploring Rural Teaching Transitions<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Rural teaching is a phenomenon often characterised by transitions: transitions from urban or regional universities to rural communities, between rural teaching posts and others, and from classroom teaching to leadership responsibilities. In the last century many Australian teachers have begun their careers, that is, they have undertaken the transition from student teacher to beginning teacher, in a rural school. Rural teacher mobility is a phenomenon that has been well documented over many decades and the impacts in terms of staffing dilemmas are the focus of strategic policy reforms in most Australian states. Usually perceived as a problem for education, particularly in times of rural teacher shortages and leadership succession crises, the Bush Tracks Research Collective is seeking to understand the nature of rural teaching transitions in new ways. Through a research collaboration between educational researchers and rural teachers, central to our focus is an understanding of how people become good rural teachers, specifically, how they learn rural pedagogies and rural leadership strategies. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of our surveys and case studies of the transitional experiences of rural teachers.

**The Bush Tracks Project**

In consultation with students and graduate/beginning teachers the Bush Tracks project is investigating the transitions they experience in becoming teachers and school leaders in rural schools. The research draws upon a number of assumptions in relation

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to rural schooling. First, data from a related ARC Linkage project (see McConaghy 2002), suggest that we are facing severe shortages in relation to rural school staffing. This staffing crisis relates to the preparation, recruitment and retention of rural teachers (Appleton 1998; Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater 1999; Herrington and Herrington 2001.) and to an anticipated shortage of rural school leaders. Similar crises have been identified in the US (Bolich 2001; Brewster & Railsback 2001) and New Zealand (Lang 1999). The average age of head teachers and school executives in the Armidale District, for example, coupled with an ageing teaching force, suggests that in this district alone there will be a critical shortage of both classroom teachers and school leaders in five to ten years. Thus the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) is beginning to develop succession plans and leadership development strategies for rural schooling districts such as Armidale (McClellan 2002). While some research has been conducted in the US concerning what has been termed a school leadership crisis (Hammond 2001), there has been a paucity of research drawn from the NSW rural schooling context.

Second, NSWDET data on schooling outcomes reveals that the academic and social achievements of students in rural schools are very uneven and that absenteeism and suspension rates are high. In addition, there are dramatic social and contextual dynamics affecting rural Australian communities. These impact on rural schooling and add further challenges to good teaching and learning. Such factors include globalisation, economic restructuring, unemployment, postcoloniality, youth suicide and family trauma, inclusive schooling policies, new communications technologies, drought and environmental change (see Bourke & Lockie 2001). Our project addresses these dynamics through a focus on pedagogy, that is, through the development of an understanding of rural pedagogies and leadership practices that are grounded or situated in rural contexts (McConaghy 1998; McConaghy & Burnett 2002). Third, we believe that an identification of good pedagogy requires an in-depth engagement with teachers and their work (Cheridnechenko *et al.* 1997). How do rural teachers respond to the challenges in rural communities and schools that make quality learning for all a difficult task? How do student teachers learn to become good rural teachers? How do beginning teachers develop the skills necessary to become good leaders in rural schools?

Fourth, we are aware that due to the crisis in rural school staffing many beginning teachers are being required to take on school leadership roles very early in their careers. These roles relate to such realms as curriculum leadership, leadership in pedagogy, assessment, and school-community relations. School leadership opportunities in rural schools impact uniquely on the pathways from student teacher to beginning teacher and school leader that individuals may follow. Such pathways are frequently different to those available to teachers in large urban centres. What are the implications of these different pathways in terms of pre-service teacher education, beginning teacher support, and the professional development needs of rural school leaders? That is, should pre-service teacher education for rural teaching include the development leadership capacities or potentials? Fifth, we know from international research that beginning teachers are very conservative in their choices of pedagogy and methods of instruction (see, for example, Britzman 1990). When faced with the challenges or daily crises of beginning teaching many new teachers resort to the pedagogies they experienced in their own schooling rather than to what they were taught in their teacher education programs. Such crises can be associated with forgetting. What are these 'comfort pedagogies' that new rural teachers remember and draw upon and what programs and supports are required to assist them to develop pedagogies that are suited to or situated in rural contexts? What is remembered and forgotten in relation to previous teaching experiences and why?

In summary, our project is grounded in the rural teaching and leadership crisis, the unevenness of quality teaching and learning in rural schools, the need for rural pedagogies to be situated within the complex contexts of rural communities, the need for research to focus on the lived experiences of rural teachers, the changing nature of school leadership in rural schools, the challenges of the transitions from student to teacher to leader in rural schooling, and the conservatism of beginning teachers especially when faced with challenging situations. These factors constitute a complex set of conditions in which to re-consider initial teacher education programs and consider on-going professional development needs related to rural schooling.

The Bush Tracks project thus has four main aims:

- To understand the challenges of rural teaching from the lived experiences of beginning rural teachers and teachers making the transition to school leadership roles. What notions of ‘good teaching’ do they aspire to, where do these notions originate, and what are the challenges associated with living up to these ideals?
- To explore a notion of rural school leadership outside the frames of educational administration from which it is traditionally viewed and instead to consider the diverse opportunities that all teachers, including students and beginning teachers have in rural schools. It asks whether school leadership perhaps needs to be the subject of pre-service as well as in-service education for rural teaching.
- To identify the distinctive features of good rural pedagogies as developed by rural teachers, pedagogies here being complex processes involving cognitive, contextual and affective understandings. At this point the research in what ways is place a necessary feature in the development of good rural pedagogies?
- To review the supports and programs currently in place to enable student teachers to move to beginning teaching and then to make the transition to school leadership roles. In doing so the project will generate useful evaluative data for the DET and UNE teacher education activities.

### **Documenting the Development of New Rural Teaching Practices**

The Bush Tracks project is significant in the first instance, because it investigates the experiences of teacher education graduates as they begin their careers in rural schools. More broadly, it is designed to attend to issues of social justice in rural schooling, that is, it seeks to improve educational outcomes for all rural students in two ways: through better teacher education; and more appropriate preparation of student teachers to teach in rural schools. We consider issues in rural schooling as issues of the development of practices, specifically in pedagogy and leadership, rather than as issues of schooling organization, resources and structures. Our data details the challenges faced by rural teachers and the supports necessary for them to make successful transitions from novices to leaders.

To date, research on rural education, including the current 'Productive Partnerships' ARC Linkage Project has focussed primarily on educational structures and incentive schemes, as well as conducting case studies of schools and educational sites. The Bush Tracks project is a study of the more intimate world of rural teachers, providing rich data on the lived experience of the challenges of rural teaching and rural school leadership. Through our teacher case writing and the documentation of critical incidents in teaching we seek to elaborate the public explanations and critiques of practice and their connections to theory (Cheridnechenko 1997). Significantly, we track these journeys through bush teaching practices within an analysis of the dynamics of rural schooling contexts and the importance of place in the development of rural pedagogies and teacher identities. What notions of 'the good teacher' exist in rural schools? How do beginning teachers attempt to conform to such notions? How do they adjust to the transition from an identification as 'student' to 'teacher' and then to 'leader', and in what ways is this journey related to their understanding of 'place' in rural schooling? How do they feel being a 'bush teacher'? How does this impact on their life and work and the quality of their teaching and schooling relationships? These questions flag crucial issues in the search for strategies to attract and retain teachers in rural schooling.

In summary, the project research questions are:

- What pedagogies do beginning rural teachers use, why and with what effects?
- What are the challenges that beginning teachers identify. How and why do these challenges arise and how do beginning teachers deal with them?
- What challenges do beginning teachers in rural schools experience in relation to the formation and realisation of their identities as teachers, school leaders and community members?
- What images do beginning teachers have of 'the good teacher' and 'the good student' in rural schools and what are the obstacles to becoming these?
- What professional learning communities are available to beginning teachers in rural schools, and how effective are they in supporting beginning teachers to work through their identity issues and pedagogical challenges?
- What obstacles, opportunities, expectations and supports are there for rural teachers to make the early transition to school leadership roles?

## **Project Methodology**

The project combines both quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis techniques in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the transitions of bush teachers. In the first stage of the research 250 surveys were administered to all final year teacher education students at UNE (n = 100), and samples of teachers in their early (n = 50), mid (n = 50), and late or near retirement (n = 50) years of teaching. These surveys provide a broad picture of the career journeys of rural teachers and will allowed us to identify individuals who are willing to participate in the case study stage of the research.

The participants willing to be included in the next phase of study gave permission to be contacted. Members of the Bush Tracks Collective contacted the case study participants. Travelling to the participants teaching location allowed for a greater sensitivity and contextual understanding of the environment in which the participants lived and taught. The qualitative case studies focussed on a total of eighteen participants, all of whom are rural teachers in various stages of their career – early, mid and late. The stages are significant in a rural teacher's journey from novice to experienced. A team approach was used in gathering the case study information including in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted in pairs with one researcher interviewing and the other scribing. Interviews were audio recorded for later transcribing. Using narrative analysis the case studies provided information relevant to the experiences of teachers at each phase. For example, what are the lived experiences of early career teachers; what supports are available to them; what supports do they need; what pedagogies do they develop in their rural teaching; how are these related to their readings of their rural schooling contexts; in what ways do they participate in professional learning communities amongst their peers and teacher-colleagues; how well are their teacher education programs preparing them for excellence in rural teaching? Similar issues are relevant to mid and later career rural teachers, where the need to consider their journeys to school leadership becomes increasingly significant. These journeys are diverse and individual. Our focus here is on the resources, both inner and outer, that teachers draw upon in their work and lives as bush teachers.

Thus our project aims combine qualitative and quantitative research expertise and data gathering and analysis methodologies. In its trans-disciplinarity, our project seeks to lessen the disciplinary divides that have tended to beset teacher education and educational research (Gore *et al.* 2001). Thus, our focus on rural education draws together innovations in educational sociology, educational psychology, research on cognitive and affective realms of teaching and learning, primary and secondary schooling pedagogies, research on teaching and teachers, and both positivist and post-positivist analyses. Our focus is on knowing 'rurality' in teaching in its most complex dimensions. The Bush Tracks Team comprises a group of early and middle career researchers who are at the cutting edge of educational research across a number of fields. We are linked by our passionate engagements with rural teaching and a desire to improve our own teacher education programs through research undertaken in collaboration with schools and teachers.

### **Researching Rural Teaching Transitions**

Rural teaching is a phenomenon often characterised by transitions: transitions from universities to rural communities, from rural schools to others, and from classroom teaching to leadership responsibilities. More often such transitions are viewed as difficult, unsuccessful or problematic. For example, numerous studies including government reviews have addressed what are perceived to be the gaps between what is learnt at university and what is done in schools in practice (Boylan 2002; Cheridnichenko *et al.* 1998; Commonwealth DEST 2003; Kiggings and Gibson 2002), and the problems of the misfit between teachers and rural communities (Baills *et al.* 2002; Ramsey 2000). In addition, attracting and retaining teachers (Yarrow *et al.* 1998) and filling leadership positions in rural schools have long been considered as dilemmas for educational providers. That is, the issue of rural teaching transitions is most often viewed in deficit terms; teacher mobility is a problem. This issue is significant for many reasons, not least of which is scale. In the last century many Australian teachers have begun their careers, that is, they have undertaken the transition from student teacher to beginning teacher in a rural school. Sharplin (2002, 51) estimates that 90% of new graduate appointments in WA and 87% in QLD are to rural schools. In NSW this trend of beginning teacher appointments in rural schools is continuing, although the proportion of new teacher appointment to the schools in south-western Sydney is increasing rapidly.

In terms of the impacts on staffing dilemmas and costs to educational authorities, rural teacher mobility is a phenomenon that is the focus of strategic policy reforms in most Australian states. Unlike the studies of teacher mobility that view it as a problem for education, the Bush Tracks Research Collective is seeking to understand the nature of rural teaching transitions in new ways. Through research collaborations between educational researchers and rural teachers, central to our focus is an understanding of how people become good rural teachers: specifically, how they develop rural pedagogies and rural leadership strategies. Transitions in teaching, and the teacher learning these movements enable, are reframed as significant opportunities for the production of knowledge for teaching. Although Vinson (2002) argued that there were fewer opportunities for teacher learning in rural schools, many teachers remark that their years in the bush were formative in terms of them developing a love of teaching and in becoming a competent teacher (see Meyenn 2004). To date the processes by which this teacher learning takes place in rural schools has not been well researched. Hence we are interested here in exploring the production of teacher knowledge in rural spaces.

### **Situating the Production of Teaching Knowledge**

Studies of the transition from student teacher to beginning teacher often focus on the gaps in knowledge that teachers identify: ‘They didn’t teach us that at uni!’ Few have sought to explore and compare the processes involved in the production of teacher knowledge at these sites. Further, we argue that a fruitful place for investigation is the production of teacher knowledge that takes place in the moments of displacement and transition that exist in between these sites of the university and the school. Similarly we are interested in the learning and insights that develop in between teaching from one classroom to another, one school to another, one region to another. Using our metaphor of bush tracks, it is the journeying between places that forms the focus of our inquiries.

Methodologically, this journeying is difficult to capture. Recently, studies of rural teacher demographics, teacher turnover and staffing such as R[T]EP, the Rural Teacher Education Project being conducted jointly by Charles Sturt University, the University of New England and NSW Department of Education and Training, have

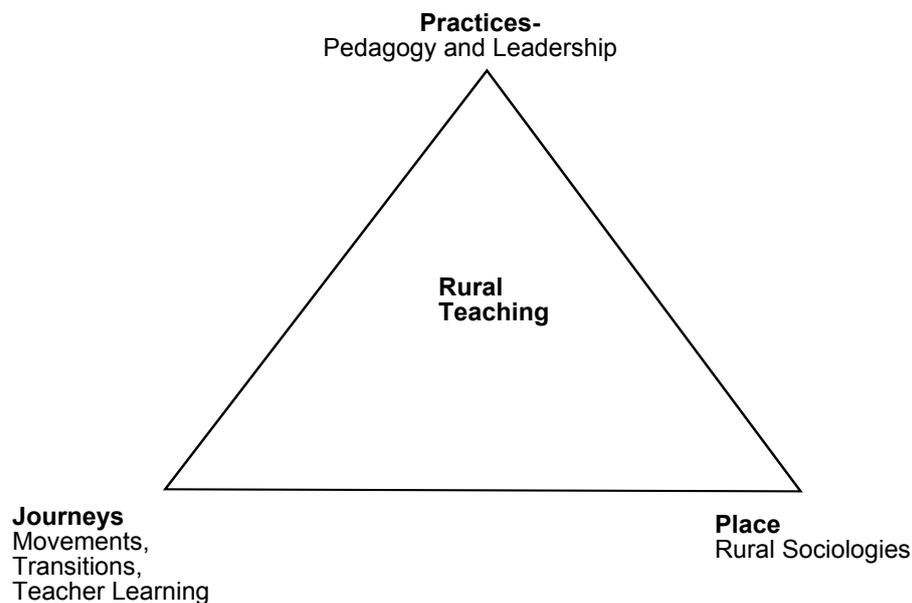
sought to inform rural schooling succession planning (McConaghy and Burnett 2002). Rather than an analysis of system-wide issues, Bush Tracks is concerned with the everyday lived reality of rural teaching transitions as sites for the production of new teacher knowledge. Such a focus is also at variance with new schooling reforms that focus on the implementation of generic models of pedagogy, such as the NSW Quality Teaching Model (Ladwig and Gore 2003). As we have argued elsewhere (McConaghy 2002) such models erase, or at best hinder, the possibilities for the production of new knowledge of pedagogy as situated or contextualised practices.

The Bush Tracks research is focussed on teachers' experiences of learning to teach and learning to provide leadership in rural contexts in terms of the meanings they make of their experiences and in terms of our readings of these meanings. We are interested in exploring the issue of the *situatedness* of their practices and in its more dynamic form, the *situating* of practices in schooling. How are the practices of pedagogy and leadership situated in schooling; what are the processes involved in the production of situated knowledges; and how do educators learn to do this situating of their practices as an everyday aspect of professional activity?

The issue of situatedness in teaching requires further elaboration. Whereas in some inland regions teachers lead more sedentary lives, fixed in place, so to speak, in others movement is central to experience. For example, some rural regions are characterised by difficult to staff schools, teacher turnover is high and accelerated leadership is the norm. Dorothy Lean (2002, 6), a school principal in a remote NSW school refers to her region as a NIDA region, where everyone is acting in some capacity. Within the region it is not uncommon for teachers in their third year of teaching to be appointed as teaching-principals of small schools. Incentives packages for rural teachers have been argued as contributing to this movement with critics arguing they act as incentives to leave rather than stay. In some rural schools, particularly in larger regional centres there is little turnover of teachers, few new appointments and issues of teacher renewal emerge as challenges. In addition to the attractions of larger centres, a number of researchers have investigated the factors contributing to the length of stay of rural teachers (Baills *et al.* 2002; Higgings 1992) with Boylan *et al.* (1993) identifying a sense of achievement, recognition, responsibilities and growth possibilities as key factors influencing long staying teachers. This continuum of

teacher fixity and rapid movement can be said to take place in both geographical and symbolic realms. Often the relationship between length of stay and practice is complex. That is, one may be fixed in place although transitional in terms of pedagogical knowledge and practice, or alternatively constantly on the move between classes and schools and with fixed and immutable practices. And there are many variations in between these extremes.

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We use the concept of socio-spatial dynamics to describe the movement through or within space and time, while the concept of social positionality signals the points of fixation. Thus the two notions, teaching as an aspect of socio-spatial dynamic and teaching as an aspect of social positioning, suggest we can understand situatedness within schooling spaces in both dynamic and fixed ways. Some teachers claim to teach to a set of beliefs and firmly held practices regardless of place or context, and others indicate they are in a state of constant reformulation in response to changing times and contexts. Although there is an apparent difference between the two positions, we would suggest, following Bernstein (1996) that both groups are involved in the contextualising or, as he argues, more accurately the recontextualising of practice, some teachers more explicitly than others. Here the poverty of language to describe the complex work of talking about practice is at issue. Developing new languages to describe pedagogical and leadership practices and their situatedness in

place, and in the spaces in between places, is a challenge. Our concern is to map these teacher journeys and describe meanings about practice, in so doing to understand more of the relationship between teaching, movement and place.

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