

Chapter 21

Re-Framing the Formation of *Rural* Educational Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this chapter is to present a rationale for reframing the formation of educational leaders¹ that is distinctively rural in its purpose, its character, its ontology, and how it might be progressed. Firstly, understandings of rural and rurality are considered, followed by a discussion of sustainability because of its profound importance to there “being future.” Next, selected critical dimensions and challenges associated with reframing the preparation of rural educational leaders are discussed, including data from an Australia-wide survey. A section on privileging the constructs of rural, space, and spatiality, plus contextual intelligence, relational leadership, and extended leadership field placements completes the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

In a very fundamental sense, we are what we pay attention to... Our attention is precious and what we choose to focus it on has enormous consequences. What we choose to look at, to listen to, [to stand for, to advocate, to privilege, to nurture, to share...] these choices change the world. (Fleischner, 2011, p. 9)

By 2050 it is estimated the world's population will exceed 9 billion, 2/3 of the people will live in urban areas, and Australia's population will have grown from 23 million to around 35 million. Pressures on the planet to produce the basics for life—food, water, minerals and energy—and ensuring equitable distribution of them as well as maintaining a healthy natural environment, will be far greater than ever experienced. Some experts have estimated that, with changing consumption patterns, as much as an extra 70% in food production will be required. Notwithstanding these and other relevant mega statistics, ensuring that Australia, and indeed all other parts of the inhabited globe, have vibrant, productive rural communities will continue to grow in importance.

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Fundamental to there being vibrant productive rural communities to produce the ‘basics for life’ is ready access to high quality, affordable education and training, as well as other essential human services such as health, law and order, and communications. Ironically, though, rural places are most at risk and most vulnerable to the rationalisation and reduction of these essential human services (Alston, 2012; Stayner, 2005; Tonts, 2005). Historically in Australia, a posting to a rural school as a school leader has, in the main, been the training ground and route for securing a city based leadership career. The magnitude of the global dimensions outlined above and the consequences of them in terms of demands placed on the planet, urgently need this pattern to change. Educational leaders who have rural specialist knowledge, understandings and skills are required. Radically re-framing how educational leaders are prepared and supported for careers located in rural areas needs to occur. Corporate, city-centric models of leadership formation are not sufficient to create, drive, energise and harness the potential of rural contexts in shaping and building a sustainable Australia. The complexities, challenges and opportunities of *rural* contexts must frame the preparation of educational leaders for country schools and communities.

Australia comprises 6 states and 2 territories, each of which has an elected parliament as well as a national government. The states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland comprise 77% of the total population but only 36% of the land mass. Distances and very low population densities are two of the dominant challenges of ensuring all children can access schooling. Under the Constitution, the states and territories are responsible for providing and managing schools. However, in recent years, the national government has played an increasingly important role in education, principally through its financial powers and by developing coalitions of support for national initiatives like the Australian Curriculum, the public release of school performance data, and literacy and numeracy testing. There are 3 school sectors in Australia—Government, Catholic and Independent. Approximately 2/3 or 2.3 million enrolments are in government schools and the remainder is in the other two sectors (Gonski, Boston, Greiner, Lawrence, & Scales, 2011, p. 4). The Independent sector comprises schools run by mainstream protestant denominations and others, and the Catholic sector includes both local parish and order-based schools. The Independent and Catholic sectors receive funding from government on a sliding scale basically according to the wealth of the schools and the families who support them (Gonski et al., 2011, pp. 129-137).

Two other brief points by way of introduction may assist readers to engage with the ideas and arguments offered. No detailed consideration has been included of the many ongoing and widely agreed priorities and challenges of educational leadership such as raising student achievement, teacher supervision and development, behaviour management, and curriculum quality and diversity. It is assumed these matters and many others are integral to the formation of educational leaders. Secondly, I have drawn quite extensively on my previously published works as well as my experiences as a rural teacher, a rural and an urban principal, a state level education department senior executive responsible for country education and children’s services, and research by the Sidney Myer Chair of Rural Education and Communities.

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