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An Integrated Approach to Attracting and Retaining Teachers in Rural and Remote Parts of Australia

Abstract

This paper presents an argument for an integrated approach to attracting and retaining rural and remote teachers. It describes existing government funded research and state government policies in this domain. It builds upon existing sociological models to propose a model of the factors influencing teacher decisions to teach in a rural location and to stay in a location. Based upon this model and the background literature the paper proposes that policy ought to be directed towards addressing both internal and external influences upon teacher behaviours in an integrated way.

Keywords

Teacher education, rural, remote, Australia, policy, motivation, attraction, retention, pre-service, early career teacher

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

It has long been a challenge to attract and retain quality teachers in rural and remote areas of Australia (Boylan et al., 1993; Plunkett and Dyson, 2011; Roberts, 2005; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, and Millwater, 1999). This has been recognised as the “rural problem” as far back as 1904 (Green and Reid, 2012) and still remains, with ongoing reports of significant issues attracting and retaining teachers to remote and isolated locations throughout Australia (McKenzie, Kos, Walker, Hong, and Owen, 2008; McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon, and Murphy, 2011). It is a complex issue, involving factors such as teachers’ dispositions, their preparation for teaching in rural and remote locations through their initial teacher education programs, their induction to beginning teaching and the level and type of support provided to beginning teachers within their initial postings (Buchanan et al., 2013; Ewing and Manuel, 2005; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011; Plunkett and Dyson, 2011). The issue is also broad, cutting across the spectrum of economic, cultural and social concerns of teachers with recurring themes of opportunities for professional advancement, homesickness and personal and professional isolation (Plunkett and Dyson, 2011; Reid et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2008; Yarrow et al., 1999). Despite the multi-faceted nature of the problem, policy in this area is often limited to addressing directly controllable factors such as salary incentives or scholarships, both of which have a limited positive impact on the issue (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin, 1999; White et al., 2008).

Recent statistics regarding the current staffing shortages in remote and rural Australian schools shows the scope of the problem, Table 1, as reported by school leaders in the Staff in Australia’s Schools Survey conducted in 2007 (McKenzie et al., 2008) and repeated in 2010 (McKenzie et al., 2011). The results show that secondary schools especially face challenges *attracting* suitable staff, with principals in 50 per cent of remote schools having moderate or major difficulty in 2007, growing to 66 per cent in 2010, suggesting that the problem is becoming worse. Provincial areas, the category which includes many schools that would be considered rural, do not fare much better (45% and 42% respectively), especially considering that the “provincial” category mixes data from rural schools with schools in large regional centres that are typically easier to staff. The *retention* of secondary teachers in remote areas has changed dramatically over the same period of time, from 13 per cent of principals having moderate or major difficulty retaining teachers in 2007 to 57 per cent having this problem in 2010. Across both studies, in both primary and secondary schools, an increased difficulty in attracting and retaining staff can be observed when comparing provincial to metropolitan, and remote to provincial locations. These statistics are just one part

of a long running trend of similar findings (Halsey, 2005; Sharplin, 2002; Starr and White, 2008; White et al., 2011) but they provide a renewed impetus for further thinking by indicating that the problem may be getting worse rather than better. The significance of the issue is framed by Roberts (2005) in noting that Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Convention Against Discrimination in Education that “the surest way to provide for this right and ensure that rural students are not discriminated against is to ensure that all schools are staffed adequately with appropriate, qualified, experienced teachers and support staff” (p. 189). More recently, Blackmore (2014) notes that according to the 2013 PISA results “Australia is high quality and low equity – with social economic background (often a proxy for indigeneity and rurality) as the greatest predictors of educational outcomes, more than any other OECD country”.

The aim of this paper is to propose a novel representation of the problem of attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote schools and suggest how existing policy and projects may be better integrated for improved effect. The paper aims to contribute towards the goal of a “...holistic, system-wide effective support program for beginning teachers” (Roberts, 2005, p. 122) that recognises that rural areas are different. It does this in three ways. Firstly, a model of the barriers to teacher attraction is proposed by drawing upon psychosocial models to represent the factors in developing a rural consciousness. Secondly, an outline of factors in teacher retention is given to recognise that more can be done to prepare teachers for rural placements, on the basis that good preparation can have a positive impact upon retention (White et al., 2011). Finally, three federally funded and university-based projects and two types of policy are described, where all have in common an attempt to address attraction and, indirectly, retention of teachers to rural and remote locations. The work aims to strengthen the case made by previous authors, that policy relying on external incentives to address the problems of attraction and retention are likely to be more effective if other significant factors in teacher behaviour, with respect to their attitudes, skills and knowledge, are also addressed (White et al., 2008; Yarrow et al., 1999).

Developing a model for attraction and retention

The challenges of attracting and retaining teachers in rural and remote areas are complex and interconnected. The issue can, however, be clarified through representation of the elements that are required to make working and living in rural locations for the long-term attractive to teachers (for the sake of parsimony, remote locations for this model will be considered a special type of rural location). To this end a model is developed that can be used to identify how projects and strategies currently in place are addressing aspects of teacher

attraction and retention in rural locations and to posit policy suggestions that can address the gaps that remain. The model is concerned with attraction of pre-service and beginning teachers, rather than experienced teachers, and with retaining teachers during the first five years of service (the early career stage), as a range of other variables are introduced when considering longer term retention.

Table 1: Percentage of primary and secondary school principals reporting “moderate or major difficulty” in attracting and retaining teachers to remote, provincial and metropolitan areas.

	<i>Primary: Moderate, major difficulty</i>				<i>Secondary: Moderate, major difficulty</i>			
	<i>Attracting</i>		<i>Retaining</i>		<i>Attracting</i>		<i>Retaining</i>	
<i>Region</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2010</i>
Metro	21%	26%	12%	15%	35%	39%	19%	16%
Provincial	25%	27%	17%	15%	45%	42%	24%	38%
Remote	35%	39%	26%	24%	50%	66%	13%	57%

* where n=1116 primary and n=1393 secondary school leaders in 2007 (McKenzie et al., 2008) and n=741 primary and n= 838 secondary school leaders in 2010 (McKenzie et al., 2011)

Existing models of attraction and retention

Much can be drawn from existing models of the factors involved in attracting and retaining rural teachers. Roberts (2005, p.194-196) identifies four areas that require attention to ensure adequate staffing of rural schools:

- 1) Professional: Rural teachers need opportunities for professional development and advancement.
- 2) Rural difference: Recognition that the rural teaching context is different.
- 3) Economic: Recognition that rural teachers have higher costs and are locked out of the economic cycle.
- 4) Social: Rural teachers live away from family, friends and other support networks.

These four areas form the basis for a model of *rural social space* in which a knowledge and understanding of rural differences is to be found within the interactions of three factors: the economic, the geographic and the demographic (Reid et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2008). Each of these factors can firstly be considered as questions for engaging with a rural space and for developing both pre-service curricula and policy (White et al., 2011): What are the economic drivers and what is the industry? What does the environment support and how is it

being used? Who are the people here and what are their various cultures and histories? Further, each of these factors can further be adopted as a lens for interrogating the other factors (Reid et al., 2008), such as: How does the environment occur for the indigenous peoples in this place? How does the local coal industry occur for the third-generation farmers in this place?

Reid et al (2008) recognise that the representations of rural teaching often held by pre-service teachers can be far removed from the reality and they invoke Bourdieu's observation that "...referring to a 'problem suburb' or 'ghetto' almost automatically brings to mind, not 'realities' [...] but phantasms, which feed on emotional experiences stimulated by more or less controlled words and images, such as those conveyed by the tabloid and by political propaganda or by rumour" (Bourdieu, 1999, p.123). The suggestion is that there is a need for teachers in rural areas to recognise the value of their particular location, and that the consideration of rural social spaces is one way to find this value. There may be social, cultural and economic capital that are different to the types found in metropolitan areas; being conscious of this may assist rural teachers in being able to find their place.

The deeper significance of this model of rural social space is that it shifts the discourse towards a model of diversity, in which rural regions are recognised for their differences. This is distinct from the deficit notion in which differences between rural and metropolitan schools are identified as problems that need to be fixed (Atkin, 2003; Reid et al., 2010). There is a balance to be found in recognising the need for equality of opportunity through appropriate staffing of rural schools, whilst recognising that attraction and retention in rural areas is different to attraction and retention in metropolitan areas.

Attracting rural and remote teachers

A model is proposed of barriers to teachers taking up rural positions, Figure 1, that builds upon the factors identified in the model of rural social spaces. Reid et al. (2010) recognise that pre-service teachers have an internal representation of rural life and the model of barriers extends this to consider the knowledge, emotions and values that make up a teacher's consciousness about rural teaching. The model has been developed from the work of Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) who in turn draw upon a number of existing psychosocial and prosocial models.

Firstly, the model proposed by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) draws upon the *theory of reasoned action* (Fransella, Bannister, and Bell, 2004), which considers the way that attitudes towards a behaviour interact with subjective norms to lead to a behavioural intention. In the context of attraction to rural teaching, taking up

a rural position is an action that follows a behavioural intention. The theory of reasoned action holds that this action is a function of both the attitudes of the individual teacher and the norms of their culture and social environment.

Secondly, the model proposed by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) draws from research into prosocial behaviour in the context of climate change. It is a significant point of difference between the proposed model in Figure 1 and that proposed by Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) that where acting to benefit the environment is directly prosocial (an action that benefits society in general), a teacher acting to take up a position in a rural school need not be prosocial. These models of prosocial behaviour however contribute a link between the psychology of a teacher, their sociological context and the resulting behavioural intentions. In the model shown in Figure 1 knowledge does not directly influence behaviour, but rather that it “acts as a modifier of attitudes and values” (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002, p. 246). The barriers to a teacher taking up a rural placement can be observed within this complex system of influences.

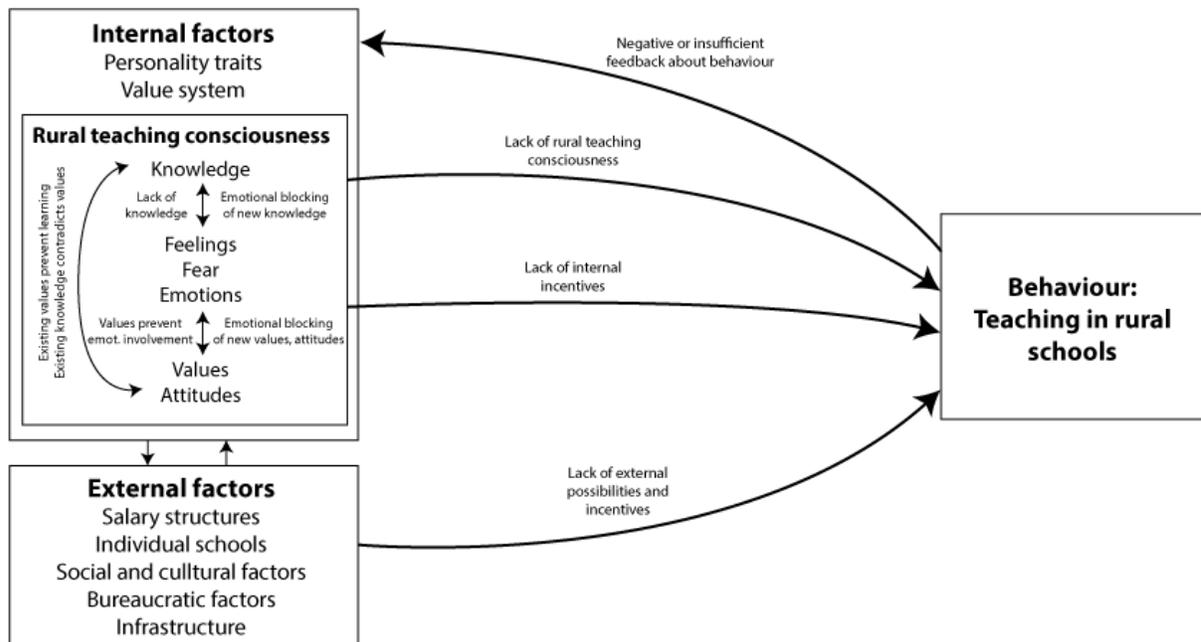


Figure 1: A model of barriers to teachers electing to teach in rural areas

Many of the factors in Figure 1 have been described previously (Roberts, 2005) and some of their relationships explored (Reid et al., 2008). The model makes a novel contribution, however, by distinguishing the external from the internal factors and by making explicit the barriers to teachers taking up rural placements.

Some well-known examples serve to describe further these factors prior to discussion of research and policy.

An incentive to take on rural placements can be provided through external factors, many of which are influenced by policy, such as salary structures, infrastructure and bureaucratic factors. Whilst salary structures can be a motivation for teachers to take up rural placements, they alone have a limited effectiveness, in particular due to poorly prepared teachers taking on the roles purely for financial gain and leaving soon after they begin. Lack of infrastructure can also be a barrier when deciding to take up a position in a rural location, with factors that add to isolation such as a lack of Internet access and poor transportation or needing to travel long distances being particularly significant. Bureaucratic factors are those government policies influencing teacher employment, with the archetypal example being the 'transfer points' system in place in many parts of the world, that rewards teachers for taking up rural placements with points that go towards obtaining placements at a later date. This policy has been highly criticised as leading to rural teachers who may see their appointments as a pathway to a more desired placement (Corbett, 2007; Reid et al., 2010).

Internal factors relating to taking up rural teaching positions can be considered as occurring within the context of individuals that have personality traits and value systems that may influence behaviours (e.g. willingness to take risks, family orientation). Inside of this context are the factors relating directly to taking up rural positions. Behavioural intention is influenced by a limited knowledge about what is involved in taking up a rural teaching position: How is it different? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Intention is further influenced by emotions relating to rural placements and to values and attitudes. Any one of these internal factors can present barriers to the others; for example, having a negative emotional response (e.g. fear) to the idea of teaching rurally or a set of negative values (either conscious or unconscious) can prevent engaging with the topic and overcoming limitations to knowledge – knowledge which might otherwise have had the potential to help overcome the negative emotions and values (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). In this way the internal factors are interdependent, where barriers in knowledge, emotions, values and attitudes reinforce one another to prevent the possibility of behavioural change.

Retaining rural and remote teachers

This model of barriers to attraction of teachers to rural locations can be extended to consider the issue of rural teacher retention. There are many factors that can influence retention of teachers in rural positions, with Lunn (1997, p. 48) suggesting that the five major barriers to teachers remaining within rural and remote areas are: (i) a desire or need to return home; (ii) desire for professional advancement; (iii) lack of appropriate incentives; (iv) poor selection of teaching personnel; and (v) dissatisfaction with teaching and/or living in rural areas. Existing policy attempts to address some of these barriers, Table 2, through allowances, priority in the transfer system and salary incentives.

Table 2: Barriers to rural and remote teacher retention and relevant policies

<i>Barriers to retention</i>	<i>Current policy used to address issue</i>
(i) Desire or need to return home	Travel allowances
(ii) Professional advancement	Transfer points systems
(iii) Lack of appropriate incentives to retain teachers	Salary incentives

These barriers are reiterated by Roberts (2005) almost a decade later, with the inclusion of a listing of policy suggestions that may be able to further address these barriers, Table 3. Many of these suggestions are based upon the external motivations of teachers. The suggestion here, however, is that such policies can be made more effective through addressing the internal motivations of teachers – their values, attitudes and knowledge.

Table 3: Barriers to rural and remote teacher retention and potential policies (Roberts, 2005)

<i>Barriers to retention</i>	<i>Potential policy to address issue</i>
(i) Desire or need to return home	Improved ICT infrastructure
(ii) Professional advancement	Increased budget for professional development and training Support for further study Provide alternate pathways for career advancement
(iii) Lack of appropriate incentives to retain teachers	Paid sabbatical/study leave Increased leave with length of service
(iv) poor selection of teaching personnel	Allow principals a 'trial period' before accepting positions

	Encourage teachers from rural and remote areas to apply for rural positions
(v) dissatisfaction with teaching and/or living in rural areas	Vehicle allowances and cost of living allowances Rental subsidies Acceptance payments to cover the cost of setting up a home

Retention through teacher support

Whilst teachers can continue to develop their skills throughout their career, the time in which policy is most needed and most able to impact them is during pre-service education and early career teacher support. Research over the last two decades has led to an understanding of how to help teachers be more satisfied with their teaching and living situation through support, and Table 4 lists these factors, grouped by the area of teaching policy they relate to on the basis that teacher retention is influenced by all aspects of teacher preparation.

Firstly, teachers that are prepared for rural teaching – in terms of specific knowledge, values and attitudes, as well as general attributes – are more likely to remain teachers, where the most significant part of preparation is having had adequate professional experience in rural or remote contexts (Kline, White, and Lock, 2013; White et al., 2011). Further, teachers can, through their preparation, be imbued with more general attributes that can assist them in their ability to bounce back from the problems they may encounter (e.g. discipline problems, poor administrative support and poor overall school culture (Boser, 2000)), by developing resilience (Beltman, Mansfield, and Price, 2011; Mansfield, Beltman, Price, and McConney, 2012).

Secondly, the selection of teachers for rural positions affects levels of attrition. Given staffing shortages there is often a limited choice of staff to fill existing positions; however, were more teachers attracted to rural positions, then retention can be improved through the selection of adequately prepared teachers and giving candidates adequate time to make an informed decision (Roberts, 2005).

Finally, once teachers commence their service there are many ways in which their satisfaction with teaching and living can be improved. Early career teachers are significantly influenced by the support provided to them in the form of induction and mentoring programs, with quality programs leading to reduced attrition (Ingersoll and Strong, 2011). The provision of structured reflection (Griffiths, 2000) and emotional support (Odell, 1986) are critical elements of these

programs. More generally, teachers in rural areas are contending with isolation, which can make it difficult to develop a professional identity and to feel a part of a professional community (Herrington and Herrington, 2001). Teacher satisfaction with their living situation similarly relies upon integration into the community, which can be influenced by both preparation of teachers and preparation of the community for teachers (Yarrow et al., 1999).

Table 4: Factors in teacher retention

<i>Area of teacher policy</i>	<i>Factors/opportunities</i>
Pre-service education content	Developing rural consciousness (Figure 1) Developing resilience
Pre-service practical experience	Incentives for rural experience (e.g. scholarships) Support during practical experience (induction, mentoring)
Selection of staff	Criteria for selection
In-service support	Emotional support, mentoring, collegiality, structured reflection, professional community membership (support for teaching) Support for career advancement and professional development (support for developing professional identity and futures) Support for transport, living, communication expenses and incentives to remain Support for infrastructure, social and cultural development (at both school and community level)

Projects and policy addressing rural and remote teacher attraction and retention

Three projects and two types of policy that aim to address aspects of attraction and prepare teachers for retention are described in this section. These projects are described as examples of how addressing the internal factors of teachers can potentially impact upon attraction and retention.

Projects aimed at attracting and retaining teachers

The first two projects are targeted at initial teacher education programs. There is growing evidence that pre-service education can influence attraction and retention in many ways, such as through the development of realistic representations of

rural life and learning about rural schools through experience (White et al., 2011) and through the development of more general skills such as resilience (Beltman et al., 2011; Mansfield et al., 2012). The third project is aimed at supporting teachers across the transition from pre-service graduate career stage educators to beginning teachers, and on to meeting the requirements of proficient career stage educators, as described by the Professional Standards for Australian Teachers (AITSL, 2010). These projects have in common: (i) the use of the Internet as a platform for engagement, connection, communication and dissemination; and (ii) an aim to support teachers in rural and remote locations nationwide, rather than in one particular institution or region. They show examples of ways that policy decisions to invest in comparatively small-scale research can lead to potential national impacts upon rural teacher attraction and retention. This suggestion is, however, limited by a lack of research evaluating the effectiveness of these projects upon attraction and retention.

The *Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum* (RRRTEC) project provides resources to assist teacher educators in developing programs and preparing pre-service teachers for rural and remote locations (Kline et al., 2013; White and Kline, 2012). The RRRTEC website¹ brings together research and educational modules around common themes of promoting: (i) practical experience of teaching in rural and remote classrooms; (ii) preparation for the types of schools found in rural and remote setting; and (iii) preparation for living in rural and remote communities. The program follows the work of Hemmings and Boylan (1992) in the approach that teachers need to be adequately prepared for rural teaching before taking up this role.

The *Building Resilience in Teacher Education* (BRITE) project is aimed at all teachers rather than specifically rural teachers, yet it is recognised that rural teachers have the greatest need given their vulnerable status (Beltman et al., 2011; Mansfield et al., 2012). The project has developed a series of interactive online modules² aimed at developing teacher resilience during their teacher education program that can further serve as an accessible reference once they have commenced service. The program aims to develop in teachers a consciousness of the concept of resilience, as well as a series of tools to develop it. The suggested strategies involve teachers developing their *relational agency* (Edwards, 2005,

¹ <http://www.rrrtec.net.au>, accessed 13th August 2014

² <http://www.brite.edu.au>, accessed 13th August 2014

2011), knowledge about health and wellness, useful teaching skills and a greater emotional awareness.

The *TeachQA* project is aimed at augmenting the support that teachers receive when they commence final year professional experience (Kelly, 2013; Kelly, Reushle, Chakrabarty, and Kinnane, 2014). The project aims to address the finding that around 20 per cent of teachers do say that they did not receive any support as an early career teacher, where support is defined as any one of induction programs, mentoring, reduced face-to-face load, structured reflection or institutional follow-up (Kelly et al., 2014; McKenzie et al., 2008). TeachQA provides this support by developing an online community that makes it easy for teachers to ask questions about their professional practice, professional knowledge and professional engagement and to have this supported by other beginning teachers, experienced teachers, accreditation bodies and key stakeholders, such as employers and unions.

Policy aimed at attracting and retaining teachers

Education policy at two levels will be briefly described firstly at the level of pre-service support and secondly at the level of in-service incentivising.

In Australia, it is typical for states to provide a form of ‘rural placement’ scholarship to support some teachers in undertaking their pre-service practical experience in rural or remote schools with some form of this place in Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland (White et al., 2008). The logic behind this policy is that small incentives (e.g. \$1,500 in Queensland) at the pre-service teacher level can lead to many years of further rural service following teacher graduation. Some states have policies which extend this support beyond the financial, such as the NSW ‘Beyond the Line’ (BTL) program which facilitates pre-service teacher orientation through a structured rural community visit prior to the practical experience. BTL has been further integrated into a teacher education program at the University of Western Sydney and an evaluation showed that it was extremely successful in promoting pre-service teachers’ attraction to rural positions (Gregson, Waters, and Gruppetta, 2006). This supports the argument put forward here, that integration of the different factors upon teachers is one way to improve attraction.

Once teachers are in service there is a second type of policy aimed at incentivising teachers to go to rural or remote areas. These schemes typically use either financial rewards or incentives through future benefits, such as improved ability to select teaching location in future years through transfer systems. An example of

this is the Remote Area Incentive Scheme (RAIS) in the state of Queensland, Australia, which provides incentives for teachers to take up positions in remote areas through a combination of salary supplements, travel reimbursements, transfer points and additional leave³.

Discussion: Future policy directions

This paper has proposed a novel representation of the interconnected problems of attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote locations. Several existing projects and policies have been described that attempt to address aspects of this multi-faceted challenge. With the benefit of this perspective, the possibility for further policy development around attraction and retention to these locations is evident.

The three projects described (RRRTEC, BRITE and TeachQA) are national in scope and make use of current information and communication technology. In the case of RRRTEC, teacher educators work together to develop resources for teacher preparation. In the case of BRITE, teacher educators introduce learning about resilience into teacher education programs, with the online platform continuing to help beginning rural teachers develop resilience across the transition into service. The TeachQA project aims to promote collegiality and peer-support within the profession. By using an online platform, TeachQA puts all teachers with access to the Internet on an equal footing, no matter how remote their location. These projects give examples of how policy, through funding research and dissemination, can indirectly address some of the factors involved in attracting and retaining teachers to rural areas. This indirect approach is limited in the sense that the effect of these projects upon attraction and retention is difficult to determine and outside of the scope of all three. However, this merely supports the need for research funding, ideally longitudinal, to better understand the factors involved in attraction and retention to deepen the work already done in this area.

Overall, the argument being made is that attraction and retention can be well served by an attempt to address the factors included in Figure 1 and Table 4. There are pragmatic concerns in addressing some of these factors, such as

³ [http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/corp/hr/hr/Pages/Remote-Area-Incentives-Scheme-\(RAIS\).aspx](http://ppr.det.qld.gov.au/corp/hr/hr/Pages/Remote-Area-Incentives-Scheme-(RAIS).aspx),

accessed 13th August 2014

infrastructure in rural and remote schools and communities. However, by viewing the wide range of factors involved it is hoped that policy can be better integrated with the complete picture. Where currently there are many different initiatives aimed at assisting teacher attraction and retention in piecemeal fashion, there is the potential for a more integrated (and potentially national) approach to strategic decision making.

There is some evidence that the movement of teachers is more influenced by the school community than by salary (Hanushek et al., 1999). In evidence from a different domain, a study of rural doctors suggests that remuneration is just one of a number of potential factors which will influence decisions about whether individuals will take up positions in rural and remote locations (Buykx, Humphreys, Wakerman, and Pashen, 2010).

Whilst extrinsic motivators such as increased wages and holiday entitlements may have a positive short-term impact on attracting beginning teachers to rural and remote locations, there is evidence that these factors do not significantly aid in retention of staff to these same locations. Of great importance to beginning teachers is the comfort of supportive professional networks, targeted, ongoing and individualised induction processes and the development of intrinsic factors such as job satisfaction, resilience in the face of set-backs and contentment in their newfound rural and remote home. Only when all these factors are addressed in a unified and coordinated way might the eternal issue of attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote locations begin to be addressed successfully.

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