Rural rides in Queensland: travels with novice teaching principals

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This article is concerned with the nature of novice teaching principals’ interactions in Queensland rural communities. Stories selected from case accounts are used to provide insights into the teaching principals’ interrelationship with the community. The article concludes with a discussion of some implications for practice suggested by these insights into the experience of rural teaching principals in the context of their communities.

Introduction

The complex inter-relationship between teacher and rural community is not a new area of enquiry; it has featured prominently in the chronicle of Australian rural education going back more than a hundred years. For example, in his recollections of the bush school, Nelson (1989: 65) referred to a 1940s dialogue that took place when a new teacher, exhausted from travelling, arrives at his new school:

A voice called out from the side, “Is there anybody there?”

I said, “Yes, it’s the new teacher. I’ve been sent from Perth.”

“We weren’t expecting any teacher. Hang on till I tie the dogs up.”

This dialogue resonates with the potential volatility of the relationship between a new teacher and the community and goes on to describe how this teacher’s predecessor had been driven out of her job because she was considered too ‘la-de-da’\(^1\). Apparently, a storm had blown away the ‘dunny’\(^2\) in the back yard and the teacher had the temerity to complain about the delay in replacing it!

More recently, The Commonwealth Schools Commission’s Report on Schooling in Rural Australia (1988: 139) devoted considerable attention to the dynamics of the relationships between teachers and rural communities. This report suggested that there is a tendency for rural communities

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to have feelings of being under threat and of not being understood by city people. Rural communities expect teachers to understand and relate to rural life (notwithstanding that their rural teaching appointment may be their first venture beyond city life), to live in the community and participate in local organizations, and to act as role models and maintain an appropriate standard of behaviour, professionally and socially. In parallel with these expectations, teachers considered personality and social factors to be critical in making a success of rural postings. In particular, they emphasized the desirability of an outgoing personality, a positive attitude toward rural people and places, and personal and social adaptability.

This article seeks to enhance understanding and knowledge of the interrelationship between teachers and rural communities, a phenomenon that has been an enduring focus of attention in the Australian educational context. To this end, we first explain why it is timely to return to this topic, and to narrow the focus to the teaching principal. We then report one component of a Queensland study that has generated case accounts depicting the complexity of novice teaching principals’ work in rural environments, with some implications for practice.

**Refocusing on teachers’ interrelationships within a rural community**

There are various salient reasons why it is opportune to refocus attention on teachers’ interrelationships within small rural communities. First, the observations above relate to teachers, in general, working in rural contexts; they are not directed specifically at the teaching principal in a small rural school, who is not only a classroom teacher but who is also expected to assume a leadership role within the school and its community. Indeed, in Queensland, there are almost 500 schools with fewer than 125 students that have a principal who has a substantial teaching commitment as well as a full administrative role. The majority of these principals have a full-time teaching load with 16 days’ release time provided per year for administrative purposes.

Small rural schools continue to play an extended and vital role in the community (Nolan 1998) in Queensland and other parts of Australia. In these environments, there tends to be an active interdependence between the school and its community that heightens the need for principals to exercise skills of community leadership and development. Indeed, this aspect of a teaching principal’s role can turn out to be the most challenging, especially for the young, inexperienced principals who often occupy these positions in small rural schools.

The expectation of system administrators that teaching principals will use the centrality of the school to develop productive relationships with the community may underestimate the difficulties that are likely to be encountered by rural principals in this dimension of their work. In particular, there is often a wide range of problems related to poverty and disadvantage occurring in small, isolated communities. Many rural communities
in Australia are considered to be in a state of crisis (Kilpatrick et al. 2002) because economic developments have brought about a decline in traditional industries, such as agriculture, mining, and manufacturing. This downturn has been associated with unemployment and a declining population posing significant challenges for building and sustaining robust school-community partnerships. Paradoxically, perhaps, the conservative nature of many rural communities is an additional contextual challenge that often needs to be addressed by teaching principals in their exchanges with the community, especially when the implementation of educational reform is involved (Bowie 1995, Nolan 1998).

Indeed, it may be argued that a focus on the teaching principal’s interactions within rural communities is invited by recent understandings of the nature of leadership. According to these understandings, leadership is no longer envisaged in terms of the role and influence of a designated leader. Rather, leadership is thought to be created as individuals and groups interact and collaborate (Kilpatrick et al. 2002). It seems appropriate, therefore, to provide some insight into what this process of leadership may look like within a context where the well-being of both the school and the community is dependent on interactions and partnerships.

Associated with more recent conceptions of leadership processes is the recognition evident in standards frameworks of the need for leaders to possess effective personal and interpersonal skills in order to build productive relationships and partnerships. For example, Education Queensland’s Standards Framework for Leaders (Education Queensland 1997) includes the category of ‘People and Partnerships’ as one of its six key roles. This key role encompasses practices relating to:

- People leadership;
- Communication;
- Collaboration and participation;
- Networking;
- Conflict resolution;
- Negotiation;
- Motivation; and,
- Social and cultural diversity.

Furthermore, the six key roles of the Standards Framework for Leaders have been contextualized in the Teaching Principal’s Guide (Education Queensland 1999) to capture the specific responsibilities and spheres of influence of the teaching principal. As such, teaching principals are invited to deliberate on the key roles with reference to the attributes of: listening; consulting; showing you like children; acknowledging the past; setting a clear direction; having a sense of humour; being a good teacher; and acknowledging the importance of community. Indeed, the Teaching Principal’s Guide (1999) is explicit in its recognition that the nature and extent of relationships between parents, community members, and a school are likely to be highlighted in a rural context, where the active interdependence between the school and its community is one of fundamental significance.
The Queensland study

The tendency for a small school to be at the heart of the community, especially if situated in a rural and remote area, presents one kind of challenge encountered by the teaching principal. The overall complexity of small-school leadership, especially in Australia, is articulated in detail elsewhere (Clarke 2002, 2003, Murdoch and Schiller 2002). It was a desire to understand better this overall complexity in teaching principals’ work that prompted the study reported here. The Queensland study, conducted in conjunction with a similar study in Western Australia (Wildy 2004), sought to identify and conceptualize the variability of influences on the work of small-school leaders within the contexts of their communities. For this purpose, one way in which the challenges of the teaching principals’ day-to-day work were conceptualized was according to three categories as derived from the relatively limited literature in the area of small schools’ leadership (Dunning 1993, Nolan 1998, Wilson and McPake 2000):

1. accountability;
2. isolation; and,
3. community.

For example, accountability, such as planning, monitoring, and reporting school performance, may result in role conflict for the teaching principal. Isolation, according to its professional manifestation, may make it difficult for the teaching principal to exchange ideas and practices with others. The conservatism of some rural/remote communities has implications for teaching principals’ efforts to implement change. These categories, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but this article concentrates on the complexity of the novice teaching principal’s role as it applies to the community context.

We focused on novice teaching principals because of our assumption that the challenges of the role were likely to be accentuated by inexperience. Accounts of these principals’ everyday world of practice would, as a result, have more explanatory power as learning resources for other practitioners.

Methods

Four schools were selected for the study. The selection process involved a purposive sample of four teaching principals in their first year in the role. To this end, teaching principals were invited to participate by the Executive Director of Schools in one Education District within South East Queensland. In order to make the study manageable, schools located no farther than four-and-a-half hours’ drive from Brisbane were chosen. In Queensland, principals typically begin their leadership career as principal of a small school classified as Band 5. Such schools have a student population of up to 80, and a staff of up to seven Full Time Equivalent (FTE) (depending on the school’s degree of complexity). Within our sample of four sites, the student population ranged from 28 to 35. The staff FTE for all sites was about 2.75 FTE teaching and ranged from 1.3 FTE to 2.00 FTE non-teaching.
Data Collection

We conducted site visits to the four schools. Two researchers spent one evening with the principal and two days in the school and community. The site visits were followed by regular telephone and email interaction spread throughout a two-month period to monitor the unfolding of particular tensions or dilemmas identified in the initial interviews. Principals were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which began by asking them to talk about their background and the circumstances of their appointment, and then encouraged them to identify and describe tensions and dilemmas encountered in the exercise of their roles. Discussions were also held with local stakeholders, such as community members, to provide information about the community context. These discussions concentrated on the expectations parents and community members hold of their principals and the issues they consider important in their local school. All the interviews were audiotaped.

Case accounts were then written for each site. This approach was chosen because we recognized that narrative or story is becoming an established way of revealing the human scale of teaching (Clandinin and Connelly 1991, Louden and Wallace 1996). We also understood that the story is an effective means of depicting the complexity of teaching principals’ work characterized, as it is, by dealing with dilemmas, interacting with colleagues and the community, and coping with a broad range of professional responsibilities (Clarke and Wildy 2004).

The accounts reported here contain descriptive and factual information about the novice teaching principal’s interactions with the community. Some are more general than others and set the scene for the particularities that occur in other stories. Each account has a title, a theme or message, and seeks to depict some dramatic action such as a problem to be solved, a difficult interaction, or a dilemma to be handled, and these problems or dilemmas are retold in their actual temporal context.

The selected accounts are written in the first person, in the voice of the principal, although two of them give the perspective of local residents. The aim is to provide a narrative account that is grounded in the principal’s everyday world of practice.

The stories that have been selected are organized around three key themes:

1. Looking in,
2. Reaching out, and,
3. Hanging on.

Looking in

In the first theme of ‘Looking in’, the focus is on the impact of the local context on the novice teaching principal’s capacity to exercise the role, a corollary of which is a need for the principal to be sensitized to the context. The initial two stories are narrated by long-standing members of their
respective communities. They depict some of the issues that are currently being encountered by rural communities in Queensland and the ways in which they affect the operation of the school.

They’re a funny lot I’ve been here 26 years, since I started covering books one day a week when my daughter was in pre-school, and in that time I’ve seen about eight principals. Some were here for up to six years; occasionally they’ve been here for just a short time before they got something more suitable or had to move on.

The school community has changed, especially in the last 15 years, with the downturn in the rural community. We’re a two-crop area and some farms have been in the one family for over 70 years, but now the young ones don’t want to stay on the farms, and I don’t blame them—there’s nothing to stay for. I worry what will happen when there’s no one left on the farms. Only a couple of the school families are from farms now; most are from the town, and there are a few blockies (they live on 40 acre blocks about 15k out of town). But in a lot of our families now neither parent works, and in some cases their parents didn’t work either. I worry about the kids of those families, and if they will make something of their life. I don’t know if it’s got to do with those changes in our community, but the parents today don’t seem to be as willing to get involved—they sort of leave it to others.

The community here—they’re a funny lot. I can’t put my finger on it, but they’re straight down the line, and if they don’t like you, they let you know. That happened with a previous principal and we lost a lot of our enrolment. In the afternoons at pick up time, they congregate on the edge of the grounds—if we see that, we know there might be a problem! The principal isn’t as important a figure as once, but the school—and the pub—are still the centre of the town.

In the next story, the nature of the school community is described by a resident who has a very long association with the school. Her grandfather signed the papers which opened the school early in the 1900s; her uncles and aunts had been first-day pupils; her children all went through the school.

Country life Once it was all farm families here, but now it’s a mixture of everything, which makes the school a different place. When they were all farm kids, I think it was easier. Having just good kids, you know. The farm kids were maybe a bit too sheltered, though—they have to come across other attitudes eventually, and it used to be that going to high school was when that happened, but now with different families in the area they are getting a bit more street-wise earlier. And that’s not such a bad thing for the kids, but it is different for teaching.

This area was all beef at first, with pigs on the side. Then, with deregulation of industries and changes in the world market, lots of the farms were sold out to bigger enterprises. That’s when the area started to change. It was a gradual change from about 15 to 20 years ago. There were a lot of houses available for cheap rent, which attracted itinerant families.

There would be two or three power bases in this community. There’s a religious and farming base, and there’s the itinerants, and then there’s a group which moves between the two. The school is very central to the community—in fact, even more than before, it IS the community. There used to be other things in the area—a hall where they had great dances, and a strong tennis club. That started here many years ago on a Sunday afternoon, and involved the whole community. We have lots of trophies from that time!

I’ve seen 14 principals come and go since I started working at the school nearly 30 years ago, when my son was in Year 1. Some didn’t stay long—they didn’t like the country life. Others stayed for quite a few years and made a real impact. One thing I have noticed is that people use the principal as a father-confessor. I don’t know why that is, but it might be because there’s no one else to look up to in that way. Some principals haven’t been accepted by the parents, who are pretty quick to make a judgment. The first thing they ask is, “Are they married?” They like them to be married; they think it makes them more settled in the area. Also, it doesn’t go down very well if the principal
keeps leaving the district and goes away every weekend. I've noticed that if the parents take a dislike to a principal, they'll go after them. They're harder on the women; they can be really picky about what they do, but they seem to take more from the male principals. And it doesn't matter how good they are in the classroom, either—if they take a dislike, then that's it. It helps if the principal communicates with the parents. I had a chuckle when one of the mothers met our new principal for the first time. She came scuttling up to me and whispered in my ear, “It talks!” She obviously thought this was a good sign. From what I've seen of teaching principals, it's good if they have experience outside of teaching too. It makes them more able to deal with a community.

The next two stories in the theme of ‘Looking in’ are told by a male and female teaching principal, respectively, and demonstrate how the initial circumstances surrounding the principal’s appointment are crucial in determining how he or she is received by the school community.

Epiphany

During the pupil-free day before I started teaching here, a parent approached me and bluntly said, “We don’t want you; we like the other bloke and tried very hard to keep him here”. I replied, “Well, I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere”. I wasn’t too fazed by him, but if I’d been a younger principal, I don’t know how I would have handled it.

I talked with him for quite a while, emphasizing the kids, and this is what he wanted to hear. It turned out he was worried about the kids and I would have been concerned, too: before I arrived, there had been a succession of acting principals, and people were sick of it. We are now on the best of terms, ever since we sold raffle tickets together and had a few beers at the pub. Apparently, he had been warming to me since he’d dropped in to school one morning to return the BBQ, and saw me in the class and heard me addressing the kids. He later said he’d liked the way I dressed and the way I spoke to the kids. After the ticket-selling afternoon at the pub, I rang my old principal and said, “There’s been an epiphany.”

Since then, that parent has been one of my greatest supporters, even though his kids have now moved on to high school. I’ve noticed that the other parents now take the initiative to approach me to discuss things, and they do it in a quieter way. It takes time to build trust, and I stressed from the beginning that if there was a problem, the parents should come and discuss it with me, rather than fret about it at the school gate. In the beginning, I had to approach them all the time, you know, “How has your week been?” and that sort of thing. I still do that now, but the parents are approaching me much more often. The kids are never the problem; the parents always take a while.

The next story illustrates how the principal, as a ‘local girl’, does not face the kind of scepticism encountered by many principals on arrival in the community.

Local girl

When I started here, I was not unknown to the parents. My partner and I have a farm in the district, so they all knew who I was and some of them seemed to know a lot about me. Sometimes I think, “Do you really need to know that?” But then I knew a few in the community too, and I’d had some sporting encounters with the school, so I didn’t feel like a complete stranger going into the role.

For the first Parents and Citizens meeting I was a bit nervous. I’d prepared as well as I could, and had my principal’s report all ready, expecting quite a turnout, as I knew they had a reputation for being a very involved school community who wanted to know absolutely everything that happened in the school. They are quite well educated, and a number of previous teachers from this school have remained in the community after marrying. But for this meeting, only six or seven parents showed up. I then realized that it’s when they all turn up that you need to be worried. Apparently, they thought they knew enough about me to let me get on with it.

They don’t give me feedback directly, but I hear about it in a roundabout way and it has been very positive. The parents weren’t concerned about whether I was going to hang around, and they weren’t
worried about how I would discipline because they’d heard I was firm but fair in the classroom, and they were happy with that. I seemed to be doing all the right things, apparently. They also didn’t mind getting another woman, as they’d usually had female Teaching Principals. Also, they felt I knew about life in the country, and the time demands that sometimes involves, like when the kids are needed to help with branding. So acceptance by the community was not a problem for me.

Probably the hardest thing I’ve found is that everything at this school is in such an established routine that it’s very difficult to change anything, and if you want to do something you have to justify it, to parents or to other teachers or to the Admin Officer. So change is a pretty big issue. But then I have to say that I didn’t want to change things too much because I was only acting principal, and it might create inconsistency.

Discussion of Theme 1

The first two stories highlight aspects of the rural downturn in Australia—unemployment, a declining rural population, and other demographic changes—and the implications for school enrolments, children’s behaviour in the classroom, and building and sustaining school-community partnerships. In spite of the changes, the continued importance of the school as the heart of the community is emphasized, with the second story demonstrating how schools in rural areas tend to provide the community with social and cultural centres, meeting places, and sporting facilities (Bowie 1995). The accounts also provide some insight into the kind of communication that an incoming principal may expect from parents at the school, and the expectations that parents hold of their principals.

Another enduring characteristic of the community is its attitude towards gender roles. As the second story suggests, the community still considers male principals to have more authority than their female counterparts. This observation tends to be reinforced by the fact that another male principal in the Queensland study had his initiation at the school assisted because he fitted into the community’s preconceived image of the ‘ideal’ teaching principal. As a young, energetic, sports-minded male, he was very well received by the community and his affable personality was adequate compensation for his not having a partner or children (Clarke and Stevens 2004).

In addition to the fit between community expectations and the credentials of the incoming principal, the initial circumstances surrounding the appointment are crucial in determining how he or she is received by the school community. The incoming principal in the third story had to contend with the angst caused by a high turnover of teaching principals prior to his arrival, which had been a destabilizing influence within the community. That incident illustrated how rural communities can be very protective of their schools, which may be the only public infrastructure/service in the environment (Kilpatrick et al. 2002). Although the principal found the incident unsettling, his empathy with the parent’s position helped to bring about a positive outcome. It is unlikely, of course, that all novice teaching principals would handle such a situation so effectively. If the community has had a bad experience with the school, it is to be expected that it will take longer for a trusting relationship to develop between principal and community. It would help, however, if incoming principals were assisted in developing a nuanced understanding of the community as quickly as possible. This involves an
understanding of country life, an empathy with the community’s values, and a tolerance of its idiosyncrasies. The resulting sense of connection with the community is likely to nurture trusting relationships between a principal and the broader community and seed the development of mutually beneficial school/community partnerships.

The community’s perception that the female principal (in the final story in this theme) was suitably fitted to the position is a case in point. This principal had no difficulty being accepted into the community for, in some ways, she was already a part of it. As a resident of the area, she was already known by most people in the community and did not have to undergo the kind of scrutiny that a newcomer to the locality would often experience. Furthermore, as a rural resident for several years, she was aware of the ways of country life and recognized the adjustments that needed to be made to her behaviour in light of them. This knowledge of and connection with the community facilitated her initiation into the role. It should be noted, however, that while this principal’s intimate knowledge of the social dynamics of the community made her sensitive to the possible reverberations of her decisions at the school, her heightened awareness of community sensibilities also served to inhibit her decisiveness in dealing with particular issues and sometimes created a certain discomfort in exercising her role.

## Reaching out

The ‘Reaching out’ theme examines the extended social function the principal needs to adopt in a small rural community—one of the most challenging aspects of the teaching principal’s role, yet potentially the most rewarding. This kind of work can be rewarding because it is enjoyable, but there are also benefits to be derived for both the school and the community from judicious interaction on the part of the principal. In the first story, we see how one principal begins to recognize how his interactions with the broader community can be instrumental in nurturing support for the school.

**Electioneering** The first time I was able to connect with the broader community was at the recent election day. It was a long day, but I can see it was worth putting in the hours. My teacher aide has lived in the community all her life and knew just about everyone. As they came through the gate she would tell me who they were. I was amazed. About halfway-through the day, I realized that it was a great public relations opportunity.

You need to know people in the community who can be friends of the school, and here was a great chance to promote the place. There were a lot of people who visited the school on election day who haven’t got kids here but might be able to help us out. There were also many ex-parents, ex-students, and ex-teachers who are keen to know what’s been happening at the school. It was like free advertising.

A lot of benefits will result from my interaction with the community at this level. I am especially keen to follow up my new contact with the council to get some funding for our new school sign. I see it as being very important to have friends on the council as a network and source of support.

The second story depicts one of the challenges of interaction with the community. In this account, the principal is aware that the school is well-placed to
help build and sustain social capital in the community, and the account describes a typical example of a small, rural school’s broad-based community involvement.

Dealing with the unexpected

It was the Sunday morning of the Parents and Citizens’ Committee’s annual weekend car rally event, which so far had gone well. Then I heard there had been an accident, but didn’t know how serious it was. We started to close down the affected areas so that other participants could return to base. When I heard the tragic news that one driver had been killed, the rest of the event was cancelled.

My role was a communicating one, and I also had a collaborative role with the police. I tried to contact district office, but couldn’t get hold of anyone until the Monday morning. I didn’t know where I stood legally; who does the buck stop with on the day? With the help of regional office I organized grief counselling for the school and the wider community. Central office was also informed of the incident so it could deflect media attention from the school, and I had to ensure that students were accurately informed, to avoid rumour.

Apart from being a shock, this incident was a huge learning experience for me. In a principals’ course some months earlier, we had discussed critical incidents and disaster planning, but at the time I thought how remote that possibility was for me, a teaching principal of a small rural school. What this situation demonstrated was that we needed to have a formalized plan of response in future—who to contact, how to minimize response times, what to watch for in people’s reactions.

It was important for me to watch out for parents who were not coping and I realized I had to be completely open. I spoke to people at the barbeque that we organized as a kind of debriefing and I would often talk to parents after school. We made a particular effort to ensure all members of the wider community were kept informed and that they were specifically invited to meetings and gatherings.

The incident reinforced how important it is to plan for these events to make sure that there is appropriate supervision, that an ambulance is available, danger spots have been identified, and that there is appropriate insurance, all of which we had done adequately in this instance. I wanted to ensure that everyone took it as a learning experience rather than as a simple negative. I think that has worked—we are all looking forward to planning this year’s event.

Discussion of Theme 2

The principal in the first ‘Reaching out’ story seems to have learned that school public relations are about two-way communication between school and community, ensuring the school is in tune with community concerns and aspirations. He is also beginning to acknowledge the value of identifying and developing relationships between the school and key community opinion leaders, particularly those who have had little previous involvement with the school and members of the local Council.

The second story relates how the school’s interactions with the broader community do not always turn out as anticipated; the ensuing tragedy proved a salutary experience for this principal. At a pragmatic level, the incident raised the issue of accountability and the need for school/community events to be supported by appropriate legal risk management measures. This, of course, is a vital consideration in an increasingly litigious environment—a contemporary angle, perhaps, on effective school/community interaction. The incident also highlighted that the well-being of the school is
closely tied up with events in the community. This principal’s willingness to take responsibility for others’ welfare in the aftermath of the accident helped the community to come to terms with what happened and indicates his skills as a leader.

**Hanging on**

As the third key theme illustrates, the role of the teaching principal in a rural community is fraught with tensions and dilemmas. In the following story, the competing demands made on a principal in the course of his work are evident.

_You can get buried_ There are a lot of demands on the teaching principal in a small community, and I knew I had to strike a balance. Friends who had been teaching principals had warned me that it was one of the hardest roles you can do. The school is expected to be the hub of the community, and often you have to do extra things like call bingo or sell raffle tickets, but that promotes the school and it’s good PR, so you have to do it.

Being known everywhere you go can be good, but you have to be careful, too. The hairdresser says to me, “Oh, you’re the principal” and wants to know what’s going on, so you have to be a bit guarded. Sometimes you have to do social work too. The other day, a mother approached me at the raffle and talked in great detail about the tragedy that had just happened in her family, and then another one wanted to give me all the details of a marriage break up. I was only there to sell raffle tickets and have a beer! I went home and felt like a stiff scotch.

You have to be very careful how much to take on outside the school. It could bury you if you let it. I don’t let it happen here. I’ve had to say no on a number of occasions, and this is perhaps easier for me than for a single Teaching Principal because I point out that I have family commitments and the parents understand that.

In the next story, a principal who is very successful at engaging with the community, realizes that for his personal well-being, there must be limits to that engagement.

_Two beers and a chat, please_ For about the first eight months after I arrived in this town, I was on my own and found the community a little stand-offish. People in a small community tend to be a bit more conservative. I was also aware that everyone was watching me: the so-called fishbowl effect. You’re not your own identity—you’re everyone’s. At times it did get tough, and probably had a lot to do with the high workload. My loneliness was worst on a Saturday night when there wasn’t much to do and I sometimes thought, “What the hell am I doing here?” I often used to have the TV on in the house just for the sound; it seemed that the TV and I were best mates, even though I didn’t watch it much.

Things began to improve as I became more accepted in the community. It takes time for people to work out who you are and what you stand for, and to decide whether or not they can trust you. I found that the best way of becoming accepted was to go to as many events and social functions as possible, even if you didn’t feel like it. Sport’s a good way of doing this, and I felt that I had truly arrived when I organized a social cricket carnival. I think that sent a message to the community that I wanted to be part of it but also wanted something to do.

Even so, I sometimes yearned to talk to people outside of the school situation. I would go to the pub to have a couple of beers and a chat with workers from the local factory who were outside the school arena. They didn’t want to talk about school, which was just perfect for me because it gave me a release from work. Sometimes, if I really wanted to get away and be by myself, I would go off fishing. No one could find me down by the creek.
Discussion of Theme 3

One of the tensions facing a teaching principal is balancing the need to be involved in community affairs, while simultaneously maintaining an appropriate professional distance in day-to-day dealings with members of the community, as the first story in the ‘Hanging on’ theme illustrates. Another tension can emerge because of competing community and family demands. Achieving the balance between work/home/family/self is something at which the principal in the first story is becoming more successful. This may be, as this principal implies, because of his family situation. It may also be attributable to his maturity and life experience, which are emphasized elsewhere in his case account as a whole (Clarke and Stevens 2004).

The novice teaching principal who tells the second story relates how there were times in his early appointment when he felt overwhelmed and lonely, and craved company outside the school milieu. He, too, realized he had to find a balance in his life if he were to play his role effectively, and he did this by consciously distancing himself when necessary, and finding appropriate social outlets.

Discussion, implications, and advice

These brief portrayals of novice teaching principals’ interactions with their rural communities illuminate practice and assist in the learning and development processes of aspirant and in-post principals. One message that emerges from the stories is that the context of a small rural community influences both what teaching principals must do as well as what they can do (Bolman and Deal 1997). Principals should ideally have an intimate knowledge of the context surrounding their new school. This is especially important given that rural communities are imbued with particular understandings of behavioural appropriateness and cultural expectations. It is also important given the extent of the economic and social changes that are occurring in rural communities, directly affecting the day-to-day operation of a school.

Providing up-to-date, detailed information on a school’s context to incoming principals may be difficult to organize on the part of an education authority. However, it might be worth examining the possibility of formal handovers between incoming and outgoing principals with input from appropriate system administrators. It might also be desirable for directors of local jurisdictions to take into account contextual circumstances in designating appointees to particular schools. For example, in some rural communities there appears to be a perception that young women do not make effective school leaders (D’Arcy 1995), in which case it could be an especially challenging context for some young, single females to experience their initiation into the teaching principalship. Other communities, which have encountered a rapid succession of teaching principals, are unlikely to respond positively toward a new incumbent being appointed on a temporary basis.

The stories demonstrate that the efficacy of the teaching principal will be determined to a large extent by his/her ability to interact with different
stakeholders in the community as a whole. This highlights the value of incorporating knowledge of how the school fits into a community, how communities work, and how principals can work effectively with community partners, into leadership programmes. An integral component of such a professional knowledge base should be a sound understanding of legal risk management procedures.

The stories also highlight emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) as a recurring feature. In particular, the principals appeared to be mindful of their own emotions as well as being able to manage them. These dimensions of emotional intelligence helped them to be resilient and confident in often demanding circumstances. As leadership in small schools, perhaps more so than in other educational contexts, is fundamentally about building relationships, it is necessary to understand and empathize with others’ emotions and needs as well.

Given that emotional intelligence appears to be integral to the principal’s effective engagement with the community, it would seem appropriate that this concept should be acknowledged fully in the recruitment of teaching principals. It would also be beneficial for emotional intelligence to be acknowledged in the ongoing professional learning of small-school leaders by placing more emphasis on the value and use of emotional development for nurturing effective relationships.

**Conclusion**

It has long been recognized by system administrators and practitioners that community relations, especially in rural contexts, are crucial to the ambit of teaching principals’ responsibilities (Education Queensland 1999). Furthermore, at least in Australia, this dimension of their work has been compounded by considerable social and economic changes that have occurred in small rural communities over recent years. Contemporary understandings of leadership place a premium on processes of interaction and collaboration, and standards frameworks for leaders now incorporate these interpersonal considerations into their repertoires. We suggest, therefore, that a focus on teaching principals’ interactions within rural communities is warranted.

These accounts enable others to travel and to learn vicariously with protagonists on their rural rides, and are likely to enhance our understanding and knowledge of the complexity of the teaching principal’s inter-relationships with rural communities. These insights may sharpen selection, preparation, and development processes for the teaching principalship and help to shift the discourse on transformational approaches to leadership from a predominantly normative level to one that is more descriptive.

**Notes**

1. A derisive term for one who affects gentility (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
2. An Australian colloquial expression for an outside toilet.
References


