

## THINKING THROUGH 'THE RURAL': A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY

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*As part of her Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education course, Anne Maree Lonsdale was asked to imagine how issues the Social Contexts of Secondary Education class was reading about and discussing impact upon the work of teachers. To that end, students were asked to think deeply about one of the topics addressed in the semester, and to frame a professional development day for colleagues that teaches about the topic, attends to the pedagogy of the session, and creates opportunities for reflection and learning. What follows is Anne Maree Lonsdale's engagement with the topic of rural education.*

### AIMS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT DAY

The professional development day is designed to get teachers thinking about rurality and sense of place. It is designed to allow the teachers the opportunity to consider how they can bring various aspects of their town and/or region into the class to allow students to get a better understanding of place.

There are many issues surrounding rurality and education but it is important that teachers obtain a general understanding of their particular situation of rurality. Different rural towns have different issues, aspects and considerations depending on where the town was located, the overall region, the community members, industry etc.

The main overall aim is to get teachers considering sense of place in regards to the school, town, community and region that they are in. It is important that teachers have an understanding of what sense of place is before they can start to consider how to incorporate it into their teaching and classroom practices.

The day is about learning what people think gives this town, community and region a sense of place and also why would this be of importance or benefit to the students in the local school.

The general aims for the day are:

- Allow individual teachers to reflect on their view on rurality and sense of place, in relation to their town and region;
- For teachers to discuss the various aspects that they believe give their school, town, community and region a sense of place. Allow them an insight into what a variety of people think makes their place unique and special;
- For teachers to consider why a sense of place could be beneficial within the classroom;
- Considerations for how teachers can address issues of rurality and sense of place within their teaching and classroom practices;
- Allow teachers to reflect on the issues of rurality and sense of place in regard to teaching and classroom practices, student attitudes and development, the school, town, community and region.

## TIMETABLE

Before the staff development day a questionnaire would be circulated amongst the teachers, students, parents and various community members. The questionnaire would be in relation to their personal views on rurality and sense of place in relation to the school, town, community and region.

Time	Events
9:00-9:30	<b>Introduction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Whole group</li> <li>○ Results of the questionnaire – similarities between various groups and any significant differences between the groups</li> <li>○ Why the professional development day is being run around this topic – why issues and aspects of rurality need to be considered</li> <li>○ The importance of rurality for this particular school, town and community – research statements</li> <li>○ Consider why issues and aspects of rurality need to be discussed and addressed</li> <li>○ Possible question to consider – why does rurality need to be considered by the teachers?</li> </ul>
9:30-10:30	<b>Group discussion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Whole group</li> <li>○ Build and expand on the ideas and issues that were made evident by the questionnaire</li> <li>○ What gives this school, town, community and region a sense of place?</li> <li>○ Consider both positive and negative aspects that give a sense of place (Bishop 2003).</li> <li>○ Discussion on why rurality and sense of place are important to the students, teachers, school, town, community and region</li> <li>○ Brainstorm ideas together regarding rurality and sense of place as a whole group with someone listing ideas on the whiteboard</li> <li>○ Connect the similar ideas together into given groups</li> </ul>
10:30-11:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Break for morning tea</li> </ul>
11:00-12:00	<b>Guest speaker</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Whole group</li> <li>○ Guest speaker from the local tourist information centre about what gives this place a 'sense of place', examples, discussions and stories on the history, local attractions, major industries, local areas, landscape and environment (plus others things relevant to the region).</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Possible visual examples on display while the guest speaker is talking, such as photos of a particular landscape. Teachers can then visualise what is being discussed and start to consider how it could influence their teaching practice.</li> <li>○ Teachers can take this opportunity to find more out about the town, the region and the people that make up the community.</li> <li>○ General note taking can also be taken for important aspects and/or points</li> </ul>
12:00-12:45	<p><b>Small variety groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Break into small groups – around 5-6 people per group</li> <li>○ Each group is to have teachers from different KLAs and also with a wide variety of length of residency within the region</li> <li>○ Groups to discuss what they think is important in regard to rurality and the school and what they think should be supported and/or encouraged by the school system</li> <li>○ Teachers can use this time to reflect on the guest speaker's comments and their own personal views and/or opinions</li> <li>○ Teachers to brainstorm their thoughts onto a large sheet of paper</li> <li>○ The brainstorming sheets are to be hung together in one area to allow everyone to view them</li> </ul>
12:45-1:00	<p><b>Individual reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Individual time</li> <li>○ This time is to be used for personal reflections on rurality and for any thoughts on the issue</li> <li>○ Note ways in which rurality and sense of place could be incorporated into individual teaching practices consider the guest speaker and the small group discussions</li> </ul>
1:00-2:00	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lunch break</li> <li>○ Some of this time can be used to view and read other groups' brainstorm sheets</li> </ul>
2:00-3:00	<p><b>KLA group discussion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Break into KLA groups</li> <li>○ Consider the important aspects around rurality</li> <li>○ Consider the ideas and concepts around sense of place that were discussed and brainstormed before lunch</li> <li>○ Discuss ways in which these issues could be addressed, raised and/or considered with the classroom for each KLA</li> <li>○ How might the concept of sense or place be intertwined into the</li> </ul>

	students' learning? ○ Does the possibility for cross-curriculum sense of place arise? If so, across which KLAS?
3:00-3:30	<b>Conclusion</b> ○ Final discussion on how teachers view their role in bringing a sense of place to the students and examples of how this can be implemented ○ Any cross-curricula opportunities or considerations? ○ How could the incorporating of sense of place into the teaching and classroom practices affect the wider community? ○ Sense of place is important but what other aspects of rurality could be discussed in future staff development days?

## RATIONALE

### For the overall rurality staff development day

The staff development day is constructed to allow for the considerations of the issue of sense of place within the topic of rurality. While there are many issues that can be associated with rurality, it is important for teachers to have an understanding of sense of place before further issues of rurality can be considered fully.

While the entire professional development day is based around the issue of rurality and sense of place, it is considered in two different ways. The first part of the day is designed for teachers to think about sense of place. The second part of the day is then aimed towards teachers considering sense of place in relation to the classroom.

The first part of the day is structured to give the teachers an understanding of sense of place. The activities allow the teachers to start thinking about sense of place and how it relates to the school, town, community and region. This thought then goes deeper into considering how they could acknowledge and use sense of place in the classroom to benefit students, teachers, the community, the town, the school and the region.

The second part of the day is structured to encourage teachers to consider how they can use sense of place within their classroom practices. After each key learning area is considered separately the cross curricular options can be then reflected on. The viewpoint is then broadened to consider how the classroom sense of place practices might impact on the school, town, community and region.

This full day staff development day is designed to be the first on the issue of rurality. It runs for the entire day to allow for ideas, thoughts and comments to occur. The day is designed to get teachers starting to consider rurality and sense of place. Hopefully, once the teachers have expanded their knowledge about rurality and/or considered their opinion on sense of place, then they can then start to consider what difference it would make in the classroom and to the students.

More staff meetings and/or development gatherings are to be arranged in the future. The future staff meetings would allow teachers to discuss ways in which they have successfully or unsuccessfully addressed issues surrounding rurality within the classroom. This would also allow for the teachers to have further discussions on how to incorporate sense of place into the classroom.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire would be circulated before the staff development day to get a better understanding of how various members of the school and the community view rurality, in relation to the town, the community and the region. All questions would be in relation to personal opinions and views on the connection between rurality and education. The questions would be open ended to allow people to expand on their ideas and views.

The questionnaire would also help ensure that the professional development day is of benefit to the teachers and that it is at the correct stage of development for them. Hawk & Hill (2003, p. 15) state that 'staff must perceive professional development as relevant'. The questionnaire would help to ensure that the day would be relevant to the teachers by considering a number of aspects that the teacher have either not considered or have little knowledge about.

The questionnaires would also help reinforce the sense of community between the school and the town. Darnell & Simpson (1981) explain that while rural communities tend to support their local school they do see them as being run by an outside influence. Bringing the community views and opinions into the school would help establish or reinforce the school's position within the community.

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of the day, the topic of rurality and sense of place would be introduced to the staff. A broad definition of what rurality means for the school, town, community and region is also to be given. The importance of sense of place is also to be discussed to give an overview of what it means or could mean to the staff, students and community.

The results from the questionnaire would then be considered. For example it could be said that from the responses of the questionnaire, it was shown that... Positive aspects of the questionnaire results could be highlighted to remind the teachers what can be considered as important.

However, it would be the areas where different responses were evident between teachers, students and community members that would cause concern. It has been suggested that when schools and communities have different values then student achievement can decrease (Darnell & Simpson 1981). Because of this, any significant differences in opinion that are seen between the school and the community are issues that need to be considered in depth.

The results of the questionnaire would also give the staff members an opportunity to recall what they may have written and their points of view. It also gives the teachers an

insight into how other teachers may be thinking and also into the thoughts and views of students' and other community members.

### **Group discussion**

This first whole group discussion is designed to get everyone on track and thinking more about rurality and about sense of place. It gives everyone the opportunity to consider the various views that people may hold and express. It also gives each teacher the opportunity to consider other aspects that they may not have considered before.

It is very important that during this discussion that both the positive and negative aspects that give the town, community and region a sense of place are considered. Bishop (2003) explains that while positive aspects about a given place tend to be drawn upon, it is important to consider the negatives as well in order to obtain a full understanding of a sense of place.

The listing of what the teachers find important in regard to rurality and sense of place help others to visualise the views and thoughts. The connecting of various views on the board helps to give an overall interacting idea, that all issues and aspects of rurality and sense of place can be interwoven.

### **Guest speaker**

The guest speaker would be someone who knows both the town and the region very well. They would also have to be someone who is very passionate about the town, community and region. Hawk & Hill (2003) explain that when guest speakers are brought in they must have good knowledge in areas that school staff is unable to cover.

While someone from the local tourist information centre would be ideal, if no one from that particular field was available, someone who was very knowledgeable on the town and region could be used instead. For examples someone from the historical society or a member of the local council could also be used.

The purpose behind having a guest speaker is to inform the teachers about the town and region. While some teachers may know a great deal about the town and region they may not have considered all the history, benefits and details together. The use of a guest speaker would also be a good opportunity for fairly new teachers to learn more about the town and region.

The bringing in of a guest speaker from the wider community further connects the school with the community. Darnell & Simpson (1981) explain that education in rural towns must involve the school and the entire community to bring people in the wider community together.

While the guest speaker is discussing the various aspects of the town and region, staff members could make notes on what they consider to be of importance or not of importance to the school and the students. They can begin to reflect on what the guest speaker is saying.

### **Small variety groups**

The small variety groups are designed to allow cross key learning area (KLA) discussions. This would allow for a much broader view of the issues of rurality without considering the impact on given KLAs. It would be important for the teachers to discuss the issue overall and have a broad understanding before they considered how it could be best implemented by themselves in their given KLA.

The small variety groups would also consist of teachers who have different residency backgrounds. This would give new teachers the opportunity to learn more about the town and the region from others who have previously gained knowledge on the region. It would also be of benefit to people who have been a resident for a long period of time as they may have overlooked some of the special and/or unique aspects of the town and region.

The small groups would also allow for a lot of interaction between a variety of staff members. Staff members who may not have been comfortable expressing their point of view in the whole group discussions may now have the opportunity to do so. This time would allow for teachers to connect with each other on a different communication level than before.

### **Individual time**

Due to the time constraints of the day, only a small amount of individual reflection time is allocated for the teachers. This time has been given to allow each teacher to recollect their own thoughts and views after the morning activities. Some teachers may also use this time to reconsider or reassess their own view points.

Once each teacher has collected their thoughts they can then consider how to bring the idea of a sense of place into their teaching and classroom practices. This is to be done by jotting points down on what areas they find important and ways in which they could incorporate them into the classroom.

This time also allows teachers who may not have been able to express their opinion very much the opportunity to do so. It is a method of letting them express themselves and working out their own views without the influence of others.

### **Key Learning Area (KLA) groups**

The breaking into KLA groups would allow for the teachers to discuss ways of incorporating the issue of rurality and sense of place into their particular curriculum area. The individual time gave opportunity for teachers to consider ways in which they might bring rurality and sense of place into their classroom. The KLA group area now gives them the chance to discuss their views and thoughts and to also consider other possibilities.

Staff members could also use part of this time start thinking about possible implementation plans that their key learning area could follow. While this is being considered, the teachers could also think about if there is the possibility of cross curriculum learning of sense of place.

Darnell & Simpson (1981, p. 179) explains that 'if schooling is to reflect the life style of the local community then it may be the teacher's role to relate his programs to the needs and aspirations of that community'. The teachers may need to recall the results of the questionnaire to consider what does the community really want and how can it be incorporated into their teaching and classroom practices.

## **Conclusion**

The conclusion would recap what the day has been about and what was shown from each activity. While it is the conclusion of the staff development day, it is not the end of the thinking on the topic and issue and that further meetings will be held to discuss progress, problems and the development of more ideas for the implementation of the incorporating the issues into the classroom.

To really benefit from the staff development day, it should be continued over a given time period to allow for future discussion (Dickinson et al. 2003). Since the issue of sense of place has an impact on the entire school, community and region, the teachers need to consider many different aspects which can not all be done in one day.

It would also be an important time to consider what impact the teaching and incorporation of sense of place into the school would have on the wider community. McConaghy's (2002) situated pedagogies model highlights the importance of quality school and community dynamics within rural schooling. The impact of implementing sense of place in the school would also have an impact on the community as well.

## **INTENDED OUTCOMES**

Since this professional development day is the first of many, the overall outcome for the day is that teachers have started to consider and think about sense of place. Hopefully they will have reflected on their own views and opinions as well as considering that of others. It is a starting point for teachers to think about what they currently do within their classes and what they could possibly do in the future.

The first specific intended outcome is that teachers obtain an overall understanding of what sense of place is. Hopefully by the end of the professional development day the teachers will have a better understanding of what sense of place is and how it relates to the school, town, community and region. The better the teachers' understanding of sense of place, the more likely it is that they can reflect this knowledge within their teaching practices.

The second outcome is for teachers to see how sense of place relates to this particular school, town, community and region. What makes this school, town, community and region special and unique? Take the general understanding and apply it to their current situation. Once again, the outcome is to build on the teachers understanding of the topic.

The third intended outcome is for each teacher to consider and question why sense of place is of importance to students, teachers, the school, town, community and region.



The teachers must find the topic relevant to their particular situation before they can make it of relevance to the students.

The fourth outcome is for teachers to consider how sense of place can be brought into the classroom teaching and learning practices. Once an understanding of sense of place has been established the teachers should be able to visualise ways in which it could be incorporated into their teaching and classroom practices.

The fifth intended outcome is for the teacher to consider the whole school in regards to sense of place. While each key learning area can consider how they can bring sense of place into their teaching and classroom practices, it should then be broadened to consider other curriculum areas. Teachers should hopefully consider cross curriculum adventures with the incorporating of sense of place into the teaching and classroom practices.

The final outcome is for teachers to think about the wider community in relation to the school and their teaching of students. After gaining knowledge about sense of place, the teachers should be able to consider its importance for the entire community. Hopefully the teachers can see the connection that lies between the school and the community.

## REFERENCES

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