

The Rural Difference Trope: Leader Perceptions on Rural, Regional and Remote Schooling Difference

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ABSTRACT: The recent Independent Review into Rural Regional and Remote Education (Halsey 2018) identified leadership as a key component for enhancing education in rural, regional and remote communities. In this article we draw upon a review of recent Australian research on rural school leadership that identified a persistent theme of 'rural school difference'. However, a limitation of this research was also identified, namely that the literature was primarily based upon small-scale interview and/or case study research. To address the identified limitation the present study takes a secondary data analysis approach to reanalyse data from the Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey. Using a range of descriptive and multivariate statistical approaches, we explore leaders' perceptions of working in rural, regional and remote communities as compared to their metropolitan peers. We find that there is a significant, and consistent, trend in the data organised around proximity from the metropolitan locations. This finding reinforces the findings of the more qualitative research reviewed on this topic. Specifically, the analysis suggests that a certain type of leader is attracted to particularly remote school leadership – one who wants to lead school development and clearly has well developed emotional intelligence.

Introduction

The recent Independent Review into Rural Regional and Remote Education (IRRRRE) (Halsey, 2018) identified leadership as a key component for enhancing education in rural, regional and remote communities. While reinforcing the important role of school leaders in rural, regional and remote (RRR) communities and the often positively reported strong connections between schools and communities in these contexts, the review also noted a number of unique challenges leaders in these communities' face. These include: difficulty in recruiting staff and leaders; challenges born from the breadth of the job with a smaller staff and leadership team for support; lack of leadership experience; higher teaching loads than leaders in other contexts; and the impact of

competition and residualisation in smaller communities. Furthermore, the array of contextual differences – such as the challenges of distance and travel, community composition and being constantly on display – of working in, and leading, an RRR school were highlighted. To address the challenge of rural school leadership the review called for a leadership postgraduate qualification and targeted leadership program, including mentoring, for aspiring and new RRR school leaders (Halsey, 2018). The review also called for a number of policy and practice enhancements to support leaders (Halsey, 2018). While supported by most peak bodies, there seems limited evidence outlining exactly what such a course should be based upon and what its focus should be. This is particularly significant given the recent critique of education policy and interventions by the productivity commission (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016) as often being based upon poor, or very limited, evidence. In this article we add to the evidence base on exactly what makes rural school leadership different through reference to Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey data.

Literature review

In a recent review of research pertaining to the staffing of rural, regional and remote schools, we noted that leadership is consistently identified as a key, and distinct, staffing challenge (Downes & Roberts, 2018), reinforcing the finding of the IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018). Within the literature on rural school leadership, we noted the persistent and recurring theme that 'rural schools are different' – we refer to this here as the rural difference trope. While not disputing the truth behind the recurring theme, that our personal experiences reinforce, we are cautious about how such a trope is semantically enacted in some research. It has the potential to position all rural schools as the same in being distinctly 'non-metropolitan'. Such an approach takes for granted a metro-normative framing of the metropolitan as normal and the rural as deviant (Roberts & Green, 2013), and ignores the specificity of place as temporally produced by the interplay of economic, demographic and geographic characteristics (Reid et al., 2010).

A second striking feature of the research reviewed (Downes & Roberts, 2018) was that the majority of the studies were small-scale interview and/or case study research. There was limited, verging on a total absence of, empirical data studies illustrating the impact of leadership on teacher satisfaction or student achievement, or studies that are controlled for other school and student characteristics. This is not to argue against interview, case study, subjective or qualitative research. Though we do argue more larger quantitative orientated studies would be a valuable contribution to the field, and help counter criticisms such as those by the productivity commission (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). To this end, this article draws upon the largest secondary data set available, the Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey, to start such a conversation. Rather than challenge the trope of difference, our aim here is to add another element of evidence in its support, albeit nuanced, and to identify areas for any leadership program as suggested by the IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018).

Before proceeding we will briefly outline some of the key themes we identified in the literature regarding this trope of rural difference in school leadership. Much of the research draws attention to factors that contribute to successful rural school leadership, and the unique challenges school leaders experience in their roles.

Navigating rural difference is key to successful school leadership

The notion of understanding and responding to issues of rural difference can be somewhat vaguely defined at times. However, when unpacked this notion relates to knowing the context of the school and community leaders are working in, and placing an emphasis on relationships with, and in, the school and community.

Turning firstly to understanding the context of their school and community, the literature specifically focused on strategies to achieve this understanding and productively benefitting the school and the school leader. Successful strategies generally relied upon situated, place conscious leadership (Novak, Green & Gottschall, 2008) that engaged with issues of spatiality (Wildy & Clarke, 2009). School leaders drawing on such approaches were aware of local issues (Wildy, Siguroudottir & Faulkner, 2014) including social and community issues that were influencing student learning (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). Through this awareness, principals were able to work through the opportunities and challenges their school experienced (Halsey, 2013) and frame challenges as opportunities for the school (Starr, 2016). This then benefits the school because leaders want to stay in their school for longer periods (Wildy & Clarke, 2005), positively influencing the school culture (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). All these approaches highlight that a standardised approach does not suit rural school (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015), and in fact disadvantages rural schools (Starr & White, 2008).

The next factor, maintaining positive relationships in and with the school and community, relates to the presence of the principal and school in the community. This research highlights that good relationships are crucial and are influenced by how principals act to support school-community relations. Here we focus on the specific roles and responsibilities of school leaders in contributing to these relations. Principals need to be willing to learn from community members (Lester, 2011) and actively encourage strong communication and collaboration (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015). One way of achieving this is to consider the leadership styles used. For example, distributive leadership practices (Starr & White, 2008) where professionals in the community are drawn on to utilise available resources (White et al., 2011) have been shown to be successful. Achieving strong relationships is also reliant on the previous factor discussed, understanding the rural context. Long periods as a school leader immersed in place and previous time in another rural community supports leaders to develop these relationships (Halsey, 2015). However, their knowledge and experience of rural communities may have a detrimental influence on relationships (Clarke & Stevens, 2006). Principals therefore need to view their community, and any challenges, in a positive light (Wildy, Siguroardottir & Faulkner, 2014). Although school and community relationships are important in any school, it was evident in the literature that we need to view these relations as a crucial factor in understanding this element of rural difference and how it contributes in such a significant way to successful rural school leadership.

Given that the research has highlighted that rural school leadership requires a different approach, it logically follows that school leaders need access to programs to understand what is required in such an approach. To this end, the IRRRRE (Halsey, 2018) drew attention to the crucial role principal preparation and support has in rural schools (Halsey, 2018). Other research in this area has mainly focused upon factors school leaders need in training and support programs, how programs can be implemented, and the benefits of these programs. Turning firstly

to successful preparation programs, the literature in this space highlighted a need to focus on supporting potential leaders to understand what it means to be a leader in a rural school and community (Wildy, Siguroardottir & Faulkner, 2014) and how to come to know the issues specific to rural communities (Halsey, 2015). In particular, leaders need to be supported to focus on macro & meso influences (Starr & White, 2008) including school-community relations and the social, economic and geographic features of their community (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). These are all factors identified earlier in the literature review that influence successful school leadership.

Professional development, mentoring and collegial relationships amongst principals have also been shown to contribute to successful leadership (Starr & White, 2008). Professional development needs to respond to the various challenges principals experience, including factors such as community mental health, community challenges, and diversity (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). One way to achieve this is for school leaders to be involved in developing their own professional development content around their own specific needs in association with training organisations (Hardwick-Franco, 2018). Mentoring relationships amongst school leaders allows principals to provide each other with feedback (Moore & Watty, 2009), and collaboratively build on the strengths and resources of multiple schools to overcome any issues they experience (Moore & Watty, 2009). This then benefits the students and the community, because principals are more involved with their students' learning and focused on the positives of their school (Moore & Watty, 2009). Notably, principal preparation has also been linked to higher job satisfaction, making it all the more important as this may link to longer-term commitment to the role (Drummond & Halsey, 2014). While implementing professional development programs for principals may present some challenges, the evidence suggests more time and resources need to be dedicated to making such programs available.

The challenges of rural school leadership

A key factor in understanding rural difference is the additional challenges rural leadership roles bring. The research highlights that many challenges arise from the small community size, and therefore, small numbers of students and resources (human and other) in the school, and the geographic isolation of the school. Interestingly, school leaders faced fewer challenges when they had greater experience and further qualifications (Drummond & Halsey, 2014). The challenges rural school leaders experience related to understanding and adapting to the rural context, and workload pressures. Some principals struggled to learn about, and adapt to, their school and the rural community and lifestyle (Wildy & Clarke, 2009), a factor that would then influence their understanding of context and community relationships. Many also felt isolated professionally, personally, and socially (Cornish & Jenkins, 2015). However, this isolation was also experienced side-by-side with a lack of personal boundaries (Cornish & Jenkins, 2015) and therefore difficulties managing professional relationships (Sayce & Lavery, 2013). Workload and administrative requirements of principals were also problematic, compounded by systemic and school viability concerns, policy matters, and teaching related issues (Starr, 2016). Here, the high workload and challenges of rural school leadership caused exhaustion, stress and health concerns (Cornish & Jenkins, 2015), issues of which were evident in the Principal Health and Wellbeing

Survey (Riley, 2019). For rural schools this is significant as it may influence how long a principal chooses to stay in a rural community.

As is to be expected, many of these challenges were closely linked to the factors identified that contribute to achieving successful rural school leadership. These challenges, or more specifically, the high volume of these challenges, contribute to the high turnover of leadership staff, making it all the more important to focus on rural difference in leadership. It was evident in this review that all of the factors identified highlight that rural school leadership requires a diverse approach, specific to the rural community principals are located in (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015). As such, a key theme we wish to reinforce here is that the rural difference trope actually operates at a meta-level, where difference is bounded to each community, not the category of non-metropolitan.

Data and Method

We have used the leader's data from the Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) 2010 survey (McKenzie et al., 2011) as this is the last year for which the source data is available. There is a Staff in Australia's Schools 2013 report, referenced in the literature, however this source data was not available at the time of writing. The SiAS is conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research, with archived data managed by the Australian Data Archive (ADA). Using a pre-existing data set delimits this article to the perceptions of school leaders about their roles, their work and related issues in education, as well as the language and methodological assumptions of the source survey. Though as Perry and McConney (2010) have argued, secondary data analysis, analysing existing data for a new purpose, is a useful and effective approach in policy evaluation. With the limitations of existing language and structure, the approach aligns with our aim of illustrating how leaders understand working in 'non-metropolitan' contexts, as reported by them.

In terms of geographical classification, the SiAS survey used the previous Australian Bureau of Statistics the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) of Metropolitan, Provincial and Remote that had been in use since 1984 (ABS, 2011). This was a superseded Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) remoteness structure in July 2011. Leaders were defined as being qualified as a teacher, a member of the school executive and position titles being Principal or Deputy/Vice or Assistant Principal (McKenzie et al., 2011). Overall, 1,579 responses were counted for the Leaders survey, with a response rate of 44% at primary level and 39% at secondary level, higher than the teachers' response rate (McKenzie et al., 2011) indicating leaders' engagement.

Standard descriptive statistical techniques including crosstabs, t-tests, Chi-Square tests and exploratory factor analysis were conducted using SPSS 25. Ultimately, the data analysis for remote was confined to government schools only. This was to remove potential bias in results due to the fact that there are markedly less numbers of non-government schools in remote (now broken into remote and very remote in the ASGS) locations. ABS data for 2018 shows that only 1.2% (50,392) of government schools are in remote/very remote locations, and only 0.3% (13,724) of non-government schools in remote/very remote locations from the total of 3,889,523

schools in Australia. The imbalance identified in the analysis of remote/very remote schools' analysis is not found for data analysis of leaders' responses for a comparison of provincial schools and metropolitan schools only.

Data analysis

A series of descriptive analysis of means, t-tests and crosstabs were run, and verified with Pearson Chi-Square. Analysis used the metropolitan category as the basis for comparison, against provincial, remote or both provincial and remote. We should note that this was not to reinforce the metropolitan category as the 'normal' or benchmark category per se – indeed such a metro-normative analysis is a central problem in producing rural, regional and remote educational disadvantage (Roberts & Green, 2013). We have chosen to do so here however as our intent is to show how rural school leadership is a distinct professional practice.

The original survey used a five-point Likert-like scale where the wording criteria changed but the sentiment and range remained stable. For instance, in one section the scale was 'very satisfied' 'satisfied' 'neutral' 'dissatisfied' 'very dissatisfied' and in another section this wording changed to 'very important' through to 'not important at all'. The design of the initial survey and the form of the data in the section we were re-analysing did not make analysis using correlation coefficients valid for this particular investigation. Given the extensive nature of the source survey, we have reported here the significant findings only, and those pertinent to the purpose of this article.

In addition to the overall analysis, a factor analysis was also undertaken in relation to views on retaining leaders in order to identify grouped responses that have something in common. A factor analysis is a statistical method used to identify and group response variables in a way that enables the reduction of existing variables to a smaller number of underlying factors that were previously not identified (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In this analysis, a principal component analysis using Varimax with Kaiser Normalization rotation was used. Each converged in more than three iterations, but was reduced to three iterations in each case to ensure strong loadings, provide consistency of three factors, and enable subsequent factor comparison (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In each case the reliability is measured by Cronbach's alpha (α), with each being regarded as acceptable reliability (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Results

Here we present the results of the analysis. The analysis of the respondents and the factor analysis are necessarily presented statistically, with all reported results significant at the $p < .05$ level. The analysis in Table 3 is grouped under the original survey sub-headings and presented as statements pertaining to significant results based upon analysis of the mean for responses by respondent category described above. The scale of the survey, with many questions having multiple sub-sets, makes this the most reader friendly approach in our judgement. In total, 47 questions showed significant differences based upon respondent's location, with the question number noted in each instance. In this section we present significant differences to the

‘metropolitan’ category, not to reinforce metro-normativity but to highlight the distinctiveness of the non-metropolitan leadership position.

The respondents

Here we introduce some basic descriptive statistics of the respondents. Of the respondents, 47.2% were principals and 52.8% deputy principals, and they had been in that current level for on average 4.48 years and had been employed as a classroom teacher on average for 16.33 years (we assume here including head teacher roles). On average they had been a deputy for 5.65 years and a principal for 6.76 years. Respondents had been in the current position for an average of 4.39 years but had been in their current school for an average of 7.2 years. This last finding indicates a high degree of movement within schools, assumedly from head teacher to deputy and/or deputy to principal. Interestingly, 52.2% intended to be in the same position in the same school in 3 years’ time, a figure that does not align with the respondents’ history of movement. Included here is that 8% intended to apply for a principalship in their current school within 3 years.

The location of the first school that respondents worked in their current leadership level were 36.1% in a capital city, 14.8% in a major or provincial city, 35.2% in rural areas and 13.9% in remote. This reinforces that rural, regional and remote schools (49.1% of the same) are often the training grounds for new leadership roles. This is potentially a positive for these areas to promote their enhanced contribution to developing leaders, though the danger is its corollary may also be true – that new leaders learn on the job in these areas only to move to larger areas as better developed leaders. This is perhaps reinforced by the finding that 25% intend on applying for principalship, and a further 13.8% a deputy principalship, in another school within 3 years.

To expand this point, Tables 1 and 2 break down respondents’ first location in their leadership roles with the location of their current leadership role to enable consideration of mobility across areas. For the purpose of clarification, the different locational references are an artefact of the way the respondents’ demographic details in the original survey and the section relating to career were constructed. Fortunately though, this enables valuable consideration of rural and remote areas in this particular analysis.

We can see here two distinct patterns, firstly the notion of rural and remote as an entry pathway to leadership is supported, but perhaps more importantly it seems a distinct cycle within metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas is in operation, reinforcing the idea of a distinct rural, regional and remote leadership specialisation. Table 1 illustrates that of the respondents currently in a metropolitan school, 59.4% had their first appointment at their current level in a metropolitan school, suggesting a closed circle of locations. However, 28.2% of current metropolitan leaders began in their current leadership level in rural or remote schools reinforcing that these are important stepping stones for some. Reinforcing the notion of as a pathway to leadership, 67.4% of current provincial and 80.4% of current remote leaders began their current leadership level in rural or remote schools. Furthermore, analysis of another area of the survey indicates leaders of schools in remote locations having been employed in more schools than leaders in schools in metropolitan and provincial locations (Q26). Together, these findings suggest that comfort with mobility seems to be an important personality trait for rural leaders.

TABLE 1: CURRENT SCHOOL LOCATION BY LOCATION OF THE FIRST SCHOOL IN WHICH RESPONDENT WORKED AT CURRENT LEADERSHIP LEVEL (PEARSON CHI-SQUARE 423.387, DF 6, ASYNOPTIC SIGNIFICANCE 2-SIDED .000)

		Location of the first school in which respondent worked at current leadership level					Total
		Capital city	Major or provincial city	Rural area	Remote area		
Current location	Metropolitan	Count	202	42	77	19	340
		% within Geolocation	59.4%	12.4%	22.6%	5.6%	100.0%
	Provincial	Count	19	50	115	28	212
		% within Geolocation	9.0%	23.6%	54.2%	13.2%	100.0%
	Remote	Count	15	5	38	44	102
		% within Geolocation	14.7%	4.9%	37.3%	43.1%	100.0%
Total		Count	236	97	230	91	654
		% within Geolocation	36.1%	14.8%	35.2%	13.9%	100.0%

TABLE 2: CURRENT SCHOOL LOCATION BY LOCATION OF THE FIRST SCHOOL IN WHICH RESPONDENT WORKED AS DEPUTY AND PRINCIPAL (PEARSON CHI-SQUARE 34.283, DF 4, ASYNOPTIC SIGNIFICANCE 2-SIDED .000)

		Current position is first leadership role?			Total	
		First position as principal	First position as deputy			
Current location	Metropolitan	Count	149	312	342	803
		% within Geolocation	18.6%	38.9%	42.6%	100.0%
	Provincial	Count	148	158	214	520
		% within Geolocation	28.5%	30.4%	41.2%	100.0%
	Remote	Count	49	43	102	194
		% within Geolocation	25.3%	22.2%	52.6%	100.0%
Total		Count	346	513	658	1517
		% within Geolocation	22.8%	33.8%	43.4%	100.0%

Table 2 however illustrates that while there are numerically more leaders whose first position as Principal or Deputy was in metropolitan areas, there are more who are in their first leadership positions in provincial and remote areas. Again, this reinforces the idea that many leaders are in their first roles in non-metropolitan places, and as such need support in their new roles. It does not however provide conclusive answers to the question of non-metropolitan areas

as a pathway to leadership, though we note that 52.6% of deputy-principals in remote areas were in their first role at that level (Table 2), further suggesting the stepping-stone effect.

Referencing the employment context and conditions, there were more leaders of schools in provincial locations in the lowest socio-economic decile than there are leaders of schools in metropolitan locations in the lowest socio-economic decile (Q8). This reinforces the difference in socio-economic status between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, and the notion that rural school leaders are often working in communities facing hardship – a critical contextual factor. Notably, employment terms also yielded significant outcomes. There were more leaders of schools in remote locations on fixed term contracts (Q11) and with hours of face-to-face teaching responsibilities, with provincial leaders having more responsibilities than metropolitan leaders (Q15b). Perhaps relating to school size, leaders in metropolitan schools reported higher hours spent in a typical week on all school related activities than those in provincial locations (Q16). In terms of remuneration, linked to the factor analysis below, leaders of schools in remote locations were less likely than leaders in schools in metropolitan and provincial locations to be satisfied with their salary, whereas leaders of schools in provincial locations were more likely than leaders of schools in metropolitan locations to be satisfied with their salary (43f).

Perceptions of the leadership role

For ease of reading, in Table 3 we have summarised the results pertaining to leaders' perceptions of what makes rural leadership distinct. Here we report results where responses from remote and provincial leaders were significantly different from metropolitan leaders. Notably many of these statistical findings support the more qualitatively based conclusions cited in the literature review, and as such provide an outline for areas to address in rural leader development.

Given the high proportion of leaders new to roles in remote locations, it is significant that respondents felt better supported in a number of important areas pertaining to professional learning and preparation for the leadership role. This suggests that the systemic focus on these locations is having a positive impact. The results here also reinforce the ideas about the importance of strong school-community links in rural schools. The importance of positive relationships in schools between staff, support from other leaders, and the desire to lead school development are also evident. This speaks to the idea of a strongly committed and purposeful leadership role that has the capacity to build relationships in communities that can often be experiencing hardship. However, successful experience of leadership in other roles was also considered important. Notably though, leaders in provincial locations placed more importance on helpful prior preparation and training and a lack of confidence in their ability to do the job (Q25f & Q25g) than did those in remote areas. That leaders in remote schools didn't identify these as significant reinforces the uniqueness of this role and suggests this as an important training gap to fill.

TABLE 3: SIGNIFICANT REMOTE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS (SIGNIFICANT AT P < .05). *PROVINCIAL RESULTS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN METRO

Significant remote teachers' perceptions	Compared to	
	Provincial	Metropolitan
<i>Professional learning and preparation for the leadership role:</i>		
• school goal setting and development (Q20a)		✓
• managing human resources (Q20d)		✓
• change management (Q20c)	✓	✓
• managing physical (Q20e)	✓	✓
<i>Working in schools:</i>		
• challenges other than classroom teaching (Q25g)	✓	✓
• high standing of school in the community (Q25h)	✓	✓
• encouragement & support from colleagues (Q25b)	✓*	✓
• encouragement & support from school leaders (Q25C)	✓*	✓
• wanting to lead school development (Q25d)	✓	✓
• not satisfied with physical resources at the school (Q43l)	✓	✓
• successful experience of leadership in other roles (Q25e)	✓*	✓
• salary & other benefits (Q25j)	✓*	✓
• helpful prior preparation and training (Q25f)	✓	✓
• lack of confidence in their ability to do the job (Q25g)	✓	✓
<i>Professional relationships:</i>		
• satisfied with working relationships with parents & guardians (Q43n)	✓	✓
• satisfied with working relationships with their teaching colleagues (Q43m)	✓	✓
<i>School staffing:</i>		
• less likely to be satisfied with staffing resources at the school (Q43k)	✓	✓
• less likely to want more authority to recruit teachers (Q48c)	✓	✓
• less likely or authority to dismiss teachers (Q48k)	✓	✓
• less likely to want more authority to recruit non-teaching staff (Q48f)	✓	✓
• less likely to want more authority for moving teachers between primary and secondary levels (Q48i)	✓*	✓
• increased authority to determine priorities for teachers professional learning (Q48l)	✓	✓
• increased authority to lead school development (Q25d)	✓	✓
<i>Managing performance:</i>		
• less likely to report that the work of teachers in the school is appraised by the deputy principal (Q58b) or head of department (Q58c)		✓

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less likely to report that the work of teachers in the school is appraised by head of department (Q58c) 		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the work of teachers in the school is appraised by external individuals or bodies (Q58e) 		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the work of teachers in the school is appraised using formal interviews (Q60a) 		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less likely to consider feedback as important in the appraisal of teachers (Q59d) 		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of assessment of evidence of teaching practice used in the appraisal of teachers (Q60c) 	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provision of formal written feedback used in the appraisal of teachers (Q60g). 	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less likely to report the use of assessment of teaching performance against professional standards (Q60f) 		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider teaching in a multicultural setting as important in the appraisal of teachers (Q59o) 	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less likely to report that dismissal follows the appraisal of teachers Q61g) 	✓	✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less likely to report other sanctions for poor performance are applied following the appraisal of teachers (Q61h) 	✓	✓

In relation to school staffing, the results raise questions about the increasing policy positions about leadership autonomy in schools, with a distinct rural-metropolitan difference emerging. The remote leaders were less satisfied with the staffing resources available to them however, they did not want to manage recruitment, staff levels or increased power to dismiss staff. This finding may speak to the need for strong teams and school-community relationships, where direct role by the principal could create relationship problems. It may also support views about systemic incentives to staff schools and/or the workload involved in recruitment processes. Recognising perhaps the need to tailor education for their specific context, another theme in the literature, leaders in remote locations were more likely to want increased authority to determine priorities for teachers’ professional learning and to lead school development.

The nature of performance appraisal, and the utility of that appraisal, appears to follow distinct remote-metropolitan patterns. In remote locations, teacher appraisal was more likely to be undertaken by external individuals and involve formal interviews. Raising questions about who and how this external feedback was provided, leaders in rural locations were also less likely to consider feedback as important in the appraisal of teachers. This perhaps reinforces the rural difference trope, and that the nature of teaching in remote locations is understood to be distinct by leaders but not by external assessors. Perhaps returning to the autonomy and importance of school-based culture, or perhaps also influenced by the difficulty of staffing some schools, leaders in remote locations were less likely to report that dismissal follows the appraisal of teachers or other sanctions for poor performance.

Factor analysis: Views on retaining leaders

Here we examined views on retaining leaders due to the reference in Halsey (2018), and in the general staffing, and rural staffing, literature (Downes & Roberts, 2018) of the difficulty in retaining leaders. Using a survey of existing leaders it seemed more logical to focus on their experiences and what would keep leaders in school, furthermore the survey design meant there were limited questions to explore regarding the attraction of leaders.

TABLE 4: ROTATED COMPONENT MATRIX: VIEWS ON RETAINING LEADERS (CRONBACH'S A = .783)

Question	Component loading		
	1	2	3
Higher pay for leaders who demonstrate advanced competence would help retain quality leaders	.791		
Higher pay for leaders whose students achieve specified goals would help retain quality leaders	.768		
Higher pay for leaders who gain extra qualifications would help retain quality leaders	.759		
Reducing workload would help retain quality leaders		.763	
More support staff would help retain quality leaders		.732	
Fewer student management issues would help retain quality leaders		.691	
Fewer changes imposed on schools would help retain quality leaders			.699
A more positive public image of the leadership position would help retain quality leaders			.692
Amendments to superannuation would help retain quality leaders in the profession			.618
Greater autonomy would help retain quality leaders			.398

In the analysis, three themes clearly emerged: Pay, Workload and System support.

1. Pay: The variables that loaded to form component 1, pay, suggest a strong perspective towards remuneration based on gaining extra qualifications and the leaders' competence – measured against one assumes a standard framework and/or by students achieving targets. It is ambiguous though as to whether this is measured against a leadership framework and if students' targets are internally or externally set. The problem identified in this article however is just how a standards framework would operate given the notion of a rural difference in leadership and that any further qualification would need to be rural specific or risk contradicting other findings in the data.
2. Workload: The variables that load to the component workload are reasonably self-explanatory, comprising a general reduction in workload and more support staff. This accords particularly with other work showing the workload demands of rural, regional and remote leaders in small schools who also often have teaching responsibilities. Interestingly, the variable of fewer student management issues also loads to this component. While this makes sense in terms of increasing a leader's workload, its practical implication is more ambiguous.

3. The final component, that we have called System support, does appear to load a number of broader variables, albeit with a theme. System changes, public image and the level of autonomy are indeed the responsibility of the jurisdictional authority and/or school board. Superannuation is perhaps more tangential, though we hypothesise that this links here rather than under pay, as superannuation policy, we assume regarding retirement age and benefits, is set by governments. We suggest the link here is breaking the connection in the 'old' super schemes of the optimum separation age to enable leaders to remain in employment and not lose benefits. Indeed 14.3% of the respondents 'intended' to retire in the next 3 years. Noteworthy is that greater autonomy only loaded here in any significant manner, and then only in a low weighting. This raises questions about the importance of autonomy as advocated by many in policy circles.

Conclusions

Within the SiAS 2010 data we found there were significant, and consistent, trends organised around distance from metropolitan locations. This finding gives quantitative support to the mainly qualitative studies outlined in the beginning section of the article. As such it addresses the limitation in the literature we identified, namely that the persistent theme of rural difference was based upon mainly qualitative studies. We can now clearly state that there is quantitative data supporting what we have termed the rural difference trope. The confirmed existence of this trope, we suggest, raises important questions about the dominant assumptions about schooling, and related school leadership, in Australia. Indeed, it is only necessary to assert difference when there is a dominant norm to be different to. We acknowledge that a limitation however is that this quantitative analysis can only identify patterns, and as such, we defer to the qualitative studies to fill out any relevant hypothesis as to what may be causing the observed patterns. Accounting for these differences has not been the aim of this article. As we are rural education researchers, not leadership researchers, we defer to our colleagues in this field to make use of the findings herein.

Significantly, while Halsey (2018) called for specific leadership development, something supported, and unpacked further by the data here, we suggest these findings go even further. The findings add further weight to many of the authors cited in the literature review who suggest that leading a rural school is distinct and dependent on strong school-community links and in school cultural development. We find in that data that a certain type of leader is attracted to, particularly, remote and provincial school leadership. This leader is one who wants to lead development and clearly has well developed emotional intelligence. While supported by much rural school leadership research, we suggest this in turn poses challenges for standards that leaders are measured by, and suggests that such standards must be context bound. This in turn raises further challenges as this may inhibit mobility of leaders, given these findings were distinct from what metropolitan leaders considered important. In terms of mobility of leaders, we wonder about the ethics of, particularly remote schools, as a stepping stone to a leadership position elsewhere. It is unjust that children in these schools cannot be the perpetual fodder of leaders in training. Overall, this research certainly suggests that further, detailed, multi-method research into the differences between rural and metropolitan school leadership is needed. From

such research a recognition of the distinct characteristics and challenges of rural school leadership should, we suggest, be incorporated in policy and practice.

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