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A social justice approach to rural school staffing: The need for a politics of distribution and recognition to solve a perennial problem

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Abstract: The last Australian government review on rural education reveals that staffing schools continues to be a challenge. To examine this problem, the paper draws on data from semi-structured interviews with pre-service teachers undertaking rural school placement. The aim is to address rural school staffing through a bi-dimensional social justice approach by drawing on a politics of distribution and recognition. While distributive justice has always been at the centre of the problem, it is argued that a solution might also encompass a politics of recognition that puts “place” as a significant category to understand the complexities of rural staffing.

Key words: rural education, social justice, pre-service teachers

Introduction

The latest Independent Review of Regional, Rural and Remote Education (see Halsey, 2018), commissioned by the Federal Government, represents the latest attempt to map out a strategy to redress the inequalities affecting rural schools in Australia. The Review confirms the persistence of the inequalities experienced by rural students, staff and schools that were recorded in the last national Inquiry into rural education (see HREOC, 2000). One of the Review’s central concerns is the enduring difficulty for rural schools to attract and retain teachers. The importance of appropriately staffing rural schools is associated with the delivery of good quality of education. Solutions to the problem of staffing rural schools have often been based on a politics of distribution, including monetary and material incentives to early career teachers to take rural posts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Cuervo, 2012; Graham & Miller, 2015; Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000; White et al., 2011). While distributive justice is at the centre of the problem of attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools, in this paper I argue that solutions and efforts to address rural staffing should take a bi-dimensional justice approach by including issues pertaining to a politics of recognition. This means, for example, examining the institutionalized cultural status of rural schooling within metropolitan university teacher education programs and the impact that this has on pre-service teacher experiences in rural schools.

To examine the rural school staffing problem, I draw on data from a qualitative study that examined the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers undertaking a rural teaching placement. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews in three stages: pre, during and post placement in rural schools. Participants undertook their rural placements in two secondary schools in two different communities. The

relevance of this qualitative study is underpinned by recent research studies that have argued that approaches to redress the problem of rural staffing should begin with the training of pre-service teachers (Halsey, 2009; Kline et al., 2013; Sharplin, 2009; White et al., 2011). This included introducing pre-service teachers to rural teaching placement to increase their willingness to take a rural post after graduation.

As mentioned above, the paper focuses on the dimensions of distribution and recognition using a theory of justice lens to analyze pre-service teachers' dispositions and choices to take a rural school teaching job after completing a rural teaching placement. I draw on an array of theorists of justice, such as Rawls (1972), Young (1990, 1997) and, particularly, Fraser (1997, 2003, 2008) to theorize and problematize rural school staffing. This includes examining through a politics of distribution and recognition, the idea and practice of rural placements for pre-service teachers. In this paper, I argue for a bi-dimensional focus on social justice. Drawing on Fraser (1997, 2003), I search for a perspectival dualism that recognizes that socially just rural schooling, and in particular staffing issues, needs a distributive and recognition approach. Further, this entails a plural approach to social justice that can overcome the distributive emphasis of education policies and issues by recognizing the cultural marginalization of the needs and interests of certain social groups (e.g. rural and remote communities, Indigenous people) (Young, 1990, 1997).¹ Finally, it is important to state that both Young (1990) and Fraser (2008) offered a third dimension of justice, a politics of participation, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

In the next section, I offer a brief history of rural education policy in Australia since the early 1970s to illustrate the predominance of distributive justice in this area through a perennial understanding that rural schooling is lacking material resources when compared to urban schooling. This is followed by a discussion of a politics of distribution and recognition, specially in relation to rural staffing and teacher practicum. I then present the research study, its methods, sample and purpose; followed by two sections that discuss through participants' comments and experiences the relevance and presence of a politics of distribution and recognition in rural schooling and teacher placements. Finally, I offer an extensive concluding section that analyzes participants' viewpoints and argues for considering a reconfiguration of the social justice approach to rural staffing by advocating for a bi-dimensional approach, a politics of distribution and recognition, to this issue. While the sample size of this research is too small to make any broader generalizations, the findings of this study point to important patterns that need consideration and further research if we are to solve the rural teaching problem. Ultimately, I affirm that a politics of better distribution of resources has not been able to redress the perennial issue of rural staffing, and that the root of the problem is also cultural injustice, in the form of lack of recognition of rural education content in teacher education programs.

A Brief History of Australian Rural Education Policy

The difficulty of staffing rural school has a long history in Australian education policy. For example, the Report for the Triennium 1976-78 (Commonwealth Schools

¹ While Fraser and Young have sustained a long and rich academic debate exposing the differences in their approaches (see Olson, 2008), I believe, like other researchers (see Keddie, 2012), that they have in common a view that social inequality needs both distribution and recognition.

Commission, 1975) identified the impoverished material situation of rural schooling. This included lack of appropriate school infrastructure, problems in staffing and a lack of diversity and depth in the curriculum. A decade later, the policy documents *Quality and Equality* (1985) and *Commonwealth Programs and Policy Development for Schools* (1986) arrived at the same conclusion about the lack of resources experienced by rural schools, staff and students. In 1988, the first policy document entirely dedicated to rural education issues, *Schooling in Rural Australia* (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988, p. 1), confirmed from the outset, the difficulty for rural schools in ‘attracting staff and maintaining reasonable staffing continuity’. In addition, the report asserted that ‘staff in these schools can find that their preparation for teaching in remote schools and the extent of professional support available are insufficient’.

More than a decade later, the national inquiry by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2000) found that the challenges stated by the above policies had not been resolved for rural schools. In terms of staffing, the inquiry placed the emphasis on the impact that high turnover of beginning teachers had in rural schools. It impacted the delivery of good quality of education for students and on the creation of a sense of a school community (p. 34). The inquiry also noted that all states and territories offered an array of material incentives to attract teachers to rural and remote schools (e.g. subsidised housing, income bonus, extra days of annual leave). It was noted, however, that the incentives ‘reward teachers that already want to be in the country and had little impact on increasing the number of applications for country positions’ (HREOC, 2000, p. 36).

These staffing challenges and strategies has since been reiterated by every state and national policy and report on rural education (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; DET, 2019; Doyle, 2014; Halsey, 2018). In the state of Victoria, where this research was conducted, the government recently proposed a set of material incentives to attract and retain teachers. For instance, up to \$50,000 for ‘the best teachers’ to relocate to ‘hard-to-staff’ rural schools; support ‘with finding housing’; and ‘retention payments of up to \$9,000 per annum in their first three years if they remain in these roles’ (DET, 2019, p. 7).

It is evident in this brief historical reconstruction of education policy that representations of rural education as disadvantaged and lacking appropriate materials makes the distributive dimension of justice the critical remedy to solve these issues. It is unsurprising that situated in the periphery of education research and practice (Brennan, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2014), and always compared with the urban norm, rural education is perennially lacking. While the policies described above placed distributive justice at the centre of the problem of attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools, it appears that the focus on economic justice has not been able to correct this problem.

A Bi-Dimensional Social Justice Approach to Rural Staffing

Within this scenario, solutions to rural schooling appear one-dimensional and skewed towards distributive justice. That is, the proper allocation of material goods is seen as the solution to make education equitable regardless of the geographic area where the

school is located. This distributive dimension places the emphasis on the possessive nature of justice (Young, 1990). As Young understood it, it is a model that gives preeminence to 'having' rather than 'doing'. To put it simply, a distributive approach to justice is concerned with the basic structure of society; that is, how major institutions (e.g. schools, labour market) work to advantage some social groups and disadvantage others (Rawls, 1972). Rawls's notion of justice as fairness, which revolutionized justice theory, acknowledged the systematic reproduction of inequality over time, including the unfair distribution of benefits and burdens in society and allocation of people to positions of power, status and resources (see Barry, 2005). Further, Rawls's famous second principle, the *Difference principle*, established that inequality was only acceptable when it favoured those most disadvantaged in society. A current example in Australian education policy is the Gonski Review on school funding, which advocates for a redistribution of better funding towards those schools that serve students from the lowest socioeconomic status (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). The Gonski Review is underpinned by a distributive theory of reallocating funds from wealthy schools to those in need in the public sector (including many rural and remote schools).

Distributive justice has informed rural education policies that have traditionally placed the emphasis on generating a level-playing field between urban and rural schooling through the better allocation of resources. This, as argued in policy realms, will subsequently ensure that schooling outcomes and students' pathways through the education system, and later in the labour market, will be defined by merit and the talent and effort that each school and student put into it (Halsey, 2018). This focus on a level playing field also means making sure that students at the margin have access to dominant cultural capital discourses that allow a parity of participation in mainstream society and access to its material benefits and goods (Mills & Gale, 2010). Encompassed on distributive justice is the provision of equality of opportunity as a principle and strategy to redress structural inequalities and generate a society based on merit where distribution of income, wealth and social positions is reflective of individual's effort and talent (Brighouse, 2010; Callinicos, 2000; Howe, 1997).

Since Rawls's (1972) seminal work on theory of justice, social and political philosophers have expanded the idea of justice to include other dimensions such as recognition (see Fraser, 1997; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1992; Young, 1990). To put it simply, the dimension of recognition focuses on the inclusion, empowerment and legitimization of the identity and culture of all individuals and social groups in society by redressing exploitation, cultural domination and disrespect of these individuals and groups. In Fraser's (2008) words, this means dismantling institutionalized hierarchies that assign different cultural value to individuals and social groups to assure a parity of participation in society of all members in the different spheres of life.

In rural education, a politics of recognition has been used to address the misrecognition of rural students and communities' culture, including in the school curriculum (Author, 2012, 2016; Roberts & Green, 2013). As Roberts and Green (2013, p. 768) argue, this misrecognition of place as a significant structural barrier to educational success reflects 'how images of rural Australia are constructed, and partly explains how rural disadvantage remains largely unrecognized' or often compared with urban as the norm, thus neglecting the social and material particularities of schooling outside the metropolis. Then, following Fraser's (2003, p. 7) 'perspectival

dualism' of justice, a proper distribution of material goods should be coupled with a politics of recognition in rural education which entails that the 'price of equal respect' is no longer the 'assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms'. Fraser's theorization of plural justice involves both economic and cultural justice to generate a parity of participation for all members of a community through the production of 'transformative strategies' that aim to correct unjust outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework' that produces inequalities in the first place (2003, p. 74). For Fraser (1997; 2003), as well as for other theorists of justice like Young (1997), justice should include both issues of distribution and recognition.

In the past few decades, both dimensions of justice have been employed to solve the crisis of rural staffing. Implementing rural practicum for pre-service teachers has been one of the strategies to combat staff shortage. This strategy was already seen as being central in rural education policies three decades ago (see Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; HREOC, 2000). This approach has a strong distributive side as it increases, albeit temporarily, the number of staff working in a rural school. It also has a dimension of politics of recognition, as it provides cultural recognition to idea and praxis of rural teaching and community life to pre-service teachers. Thus, in recent years, researchers have argued in favor of the rural practicum as a way for pre-service teachers to gain rural knowledge of what work in communities outside the metropolis entails (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Wallace & Boylan, 2009). It has been also argued that exposing pre-service teachers to rural teaching contributes to the generation of realistic views about working in rural places, including finding out if they are prepared to take a rural post, as well as providing schools with potential future staff that they get acquainted before offering a teaching job (Kline, et al., 2013; White et al., 2011). Other scholars have found that completing a rural placement has a positive influence on the likelihood of a beginning teacher accepting a rural job after graduating (Halsey, 2009; Sharplin, 2002, 2014).

Overall these and other studies, as well as education policies, recommend that pre-service teachers are exposed to rural placement. This has a distributive and recognition logic. From the distributive side, it aims to redress the unequal access to labour by rural schools. It seeks to provide a more egalitarian provision of resources, staffing, vis a vis urban schools. This can further develop into equal educational opportunities for rural students by properly staffing schools and providing a broader school curriculum. From the recognition side, arguments such as making rural placement mandatory (Halsey, 2009) are a way of resignifying what counts as real and valuable teaching experiences, including developing a participatory parity between urban and rural schools in terms of access to resources but also hierarchies of cultural value. This resignification of rural knowledge and experiences resonates with Fraser's (2003, p. 29) view that recognition is a matter of social status. In particular, this can be seen in the low institutionalized cultural value that rural placements have in some university teacher education degrees and how some of these placements are considered by pre-service teachers as a training ground for an urban post (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). In the next section, I describe the research methods and then a two-dimensional presentation of pre-service teachers' experiences.

The Research Study

This paper draws on a qualitative research project that sought to examine the role that rural teaching placement played in enticing pre-service teachers to take up a rural secondary school posting. Data was collected before, during and after the placement to account for the different positions, perspectives and experiences of eight pre-service teachers (six females and 2 males) on rural teaching. The data emanating from the semi-structured interviews with these participants serves to bring to sharp relief the role that a politics of distribution and recognition play in the appropriate staffing of rural schools.

The participants were recruited during a three-stage process. Firstly, an introduction to the project was conducted at a higher education institution during the teacher education program session dedicated to introducing pre-service teachers to the opportunity to do one of their placements in a rural school setting. Out of this session, twenty-eight pre-service teachers showed interest in receiving more information and in becoming potential interviewees for the project. An email was sent to these twenty-eight pre-service teachers inviting them to take part in a set of three interviews: before, during and after the placement. Eight pre-service teachers agreed and took part of the interviews. The ages of these eight individuals ranged from 23 to 30 years and they were all undertaking the teacher education degree to become secondary school teachers. Of these eight participants, I focus on the five participants who, after their placements, decided not to seek a rural school teaching post. The small sample size does not allow for any broad generalization from the findings of this project. Nevertheless, as this was an exploratory study into the motivations and barriers of pre-service teachers to take a rural teaching post after completing a rural placement, the data allows for the elucidation of some valuable insights on the topic.

All participants completed their rural placement in two towns in the state of Victoria. Victoria is one of the smallest states in Australia with a size of 237,629 km² in area, similar to that of European countries such as Romania and Great Britain. Three participants did their placement in a town of 4,000 people located near the Alpine region of Victoria, about three hours from metropolitan Melbourne. This town has a strong history of farming; however, in recent years it also developed a vibrant tourist industry that benefits from the proximity to the ski resorts (ABS, 2012). The secondary school had a population of 441 students and approximately 50 teaching staff, at the time of the placement. The student population was composed mostly of students from a mid-socioeconomic status (60 per cent), while 30 and ten per cent belong to low and high socioeconomic status respectively (MySchool website, 2017). The student population gender division is even, and the school has a very low rate of Indigenous students (only two per cent of the total student population). The other two participants did their placement in a secondary school in a town located four hours away from Melbourne, near the border with the state of New South Wales. The town has a population of 3,000 people and its economic structure is traditionally dairy farms and more recently, wine industry developments (ABS, 2012). The secondary school has a population of approximately 360 students, of which 50% belong to the bottom quarter of the socioeconomic status (Myschool website, 2017). There were 33 full-time staff and the gender division of the student population was even. Furthermore, the school also has a very low rate of Indigenous students (only five per cent of the total student population). While both schools and communities are different, participants' comments about their placement (see below) were quite homogeneous and did not point out to remarkable differences between their rural

teaching experience. This must well be due to their metrocentric view of rural teaching and life.

Before the placement, participants were asked about the factors motivating them to take a rural school placement. They were also asked about their own background and history and the reasons why they were studying to become a teacher. During the placement, participants were asked about their experiences in the rural school so far. They were invited to reflect on the classroom practices but also their interactions with their teacher-mentor and other teachers, with students in the school, and with the overall community. Participants were specifically asked about their views about rural life and their immersion in the rural community. For the final interview round, a few months after placement, participants were invited to revisit their experiences during the placement and specifically asked if they would, or would not, seek a rural school appointment after completing their degree. All interviews with participants were audio tape recorded, with participants consent, and professionally transcribed. The interview data was entered in the qualitative NVivo software program for analysis. The data was coded firstly by question topics, and then through a content analysis of the most recurrent themes, followed by a thematic analysis of these themes; emerging from the participants' responses. Finally, eight months after the final interview, participants were sent an email asking them to confirm whether they had applied, and taken up, a rural or urban teaching post. Their decisions completely matched the ones they expressed in their final round of interviews.

The Politics of Distribution in Rural Teaching Placements

In the three interviews, the pre, during and post-placement, participants assessed their rural experience by continuously referring to their prior urban placement. A metrocentric lens was always placed over rural schools and community achievements and shortcomings. In consonance with education policy discourse of the last few decades (HREOC, 2000; Halsey, 2018), it would be reasonable to expect that, from this metrocentric view, there would be a strong argument for distributive justice as a way to resolve the unequal disparities between urban and rural education. Thus, unsurprisingly, participants expressed the need for a better distribution of resources, as well as praising other facets of rural schooling and community life.

All participants, for example, commented in the 'during' and 'after' placement interviews that they found several positive aspects to their rural school experience. A common issue expressed by all pre-service teachers was the existence of daily practices of mutuality and conviviality between the school students and staff and the community residents. By this, participants alluded to an interpersonal form of recognition, a shared sense of responsibility towards each other in the school and the community. One participant, Edward conceived the relationship between staff and students as one based on care: 'I think the community atmosphere is terrific... Everyone is very dedicated to education as a whole and people that I've been working with at least, care a lot about the students.' Another participant, Melissa affirmed that 'in terms of the positives, the relationships that I've seen here between teachers and students are unrivalled.' This notion of rural idyll, rooted in notions of solidarity and social cohesion, is abundant in national and international literature on rural life (see Cheshire et al., 2014; Lichter & Brown, 2011).

This idyllic view of close-knit community life was counterposed with what was perceived as a 'harder lifestyle in a rural location'. By this, Edward meant 'fewer opportunities to do certain things', in terms of 'spending time with friends and going out to places'. Indeed, several participants commented on the rural 'problem' of 'being further away from resources' and 'regularly accessible' amenities – both in terms of the personal life as well as professional work (e.g. professional development seminars, recreational activities, restaurants, places to shop). Participants also regarded distance to resources and amenities as a barrier to seriously considering taking up a rural teaching post. For example, Beatrice affirmed that what would prevent her from looking for a rural school job was 'not having access to the things that you have in the city'. This was not just for personal reasons but also for professional ones. In her view, 'with kids in the city... it's a bit easier to do excursions and connect them to the wider world'. While for students in rural and remote places, she believed 'that are maybe not used to having access to more cultural, like the cultural capital', which makes it harder for them 'to make those connections from school and outside life as well'. For Beatrice, and other pre-service teachers, rural places are not just geographically but culturally distant from the urban norm. This perception of rurality as metropolitan's "other" has had a significant place in education research and policy. While the metropolis is the basis of modernity and development, rural places can be commonly constructed as backwards and removed from the social and economic forces of progress (see Cloke, 2006; Lockie, 2001).

Other resourcing issues brought up by participants had to do with school infrastructure, such as 'the facilities and the cold – there aren't heaters in every room'; better technology with students lacking personal laptops and the school not able to fulfil 'one to one computer policy'; inappropriate resources 'in the arts department'; and with some participants having a general view of 'less funding for a rural school'. Adding to these material problems, participants commented on experiences of staff shortages in some of the schools with at least two of them having to teach in subjects that were not within their specialized teaching area. These are all well reported material problems in Australian rural schooling (see Cuervo, 2014; Halsey, 2018; HREOC, 2000a; Wallace & Boylan, 2009).

Participants' experiences oscillate between an enjoyment of the rural idyll, represented on practices of mutuality, and a deficit view about the school in terms of aspects of material provision as well as the absence of services and amenities that they enjoy in Melbourne. In this sense, a politics of distribution continues to be central to attract and retain new teachers in rural places. Policy, however, needs to acknowledge that individualized approaches that focus on the teacher through incentive packages (e.g. income supplement, housing subsidy) are a necessary but not a sufficient resource to remedy this perennial crisis (Cuervo, 2016; HREOC, 2000). Other needed resources relate to the provision of services and local amenities the community and surrounding area can provide to its residents.

However, the appropriate distribution of resources continues to be important for rural schools' delivery of a good quality of education and for pre-services teachers to feel they are working in an environment that aims at educational excellence. Distributive justice, then, appears paramount to generate a level playing field between schools and regions. Following Rawls (1972), how major social institutions distribute benefits and

burdens and allocate material goods is central to pre-service teachers' experiences in rural communities. In the next section, participants' comments are placed under the recognition lens.

The Politics of Recognition in Rural Teaching Placements

At the different stages of the interviewing process, educational excellence was associated by participants with academic work that orients students towards pursuing higher education pathways after completing school. Across the board, they continuously compared the academic expectations of students in the urban and rural placement schools. There was a general view that in rural schools, students were not expected to work to the same standards as in urban schools. This sense of low expectations was present in both schools. Edward, for example, noticed 'within the urban placement there was a bit more push academically, an expectation that more or less everyone would want to try and get into university'. In his view, while some rural students might share this 'high' expectation, 'there are other students who are just kind of biding their time until they can get an apprenticeship'. During her placement, Beatrice found that 'a lot of the kids don't want to go on to the university and maybe will take up a trade or do vocational studies... so students probably aren't pushed as academically as in some of the city schools that I've seen'. Implicit in Beatrice's comments is a difference of material and cultural aspirations in the possible pathways of urban and rural students. Later in the interview she added that those rural students taking a vocational pathway are expected 'to go into trades or smaller institutions in Melbourne, like hairdressing or hospitality, instead of the bigger universities'. Present in these participants' comments is a binary perception of rural students' aspirations as urban's "other". Similar to some of the views presented in the above section, rural students' knowledge and post-school pathways were seen in deficit and were always compared to an urban norm.

Despite praising the close-knit community atmosphere, all participants affirmed that classroom management was a significant issue in rural schools. They associated this issue with students' backgrounds. This was the case for the school composed of mid-socioeconomic status population as well as for the school where half of the students were from the bottom quarter of the socioeconomic status. As Marianne put it: 'lots of them (students) have very rough backstories and come from very working-class families'. For Beatrice, this meant that the school had to place a greater emphasis on wellbeing rather than academic work. When asked during her placement if she would consider applying for a rural teaching job, she believed that she would 'be better at sort of helping kids in an academic setting, student welfare is not my strong point; so yeah, working in a school in the city might allow me to exercise what I'm better at doing more'. In the post-placement interview, Beatrice stated that she 'got a job next year teaching at a school in Melbourne'. She acknowledged that in her next school the students also come from 'low socioeconomic backgrounds', but had noticed through the professional development she was already undertaking with this school that 'they set higher expectations for their students'.

The perceived lower socioeconomic status of rural students, in comparison with the urban ones in their previous placement, was a motivation for almost all participants to take part of the rural practicum. Further, rural material (i.e. school lack of resources)

and cultural disadvantages (perceived lower capabilities by students, including a view that some families did not push their children to aspire to metropolitan futures) make for these pre-service teachers a perfect space where they can enhance their teaching skills and expand their experience. Edward, for example, stated that ‘a big reason I wanted to go to a rural school is to deal with some lower socioeconomic status students with more difficult backgrounds and just experience that a bit, which I have but it has been emotionally draining for me and difficult’. In the pre-placement interviews other participants also mentioned taking a rural practicum as a ‘challenge’, ‘something completely different’, as ‘a rite of passage’, and even invoking the notion that if they could prove that they could teach in rural schools it would strengthen their prospects to get an urban teaching post. Rural teaching, then, was seen as a *frontier* experience, a *boot camp* to condition their teaching capabilities.

Overall, the comments in this section point out to a general view of rural education as a residual place. Class behavior management is seen as a significant part of the labour of teaching. Academic excellence is not viewed the main mission of the schools as it is in urban institutions. This makes rural teaching the perfect environment to upgrade their skills, build their resume and test themselves in difficult conditions. The problem with this approach is that assumes a deficit view of rural schooling and students. It stigmatizes rurality. It devalues the material and cultural status of rural schooling through a constant comparison with urban schooling as the norm.

Furthermore, the problem is that this de-valorisation of rural schooling appears to be a priori of the teaching placement experience. Indeed, in the pre-placement interviews participants commented on the scarce rural education content available in their teacher education degree. They pointed out to one specific seminar where rural placement was promoted to pre-services teachers. This included a presentation by one graduate from the program who had completed the rural placement the year before. Participants affirmed that it would be useful to have teachers and principals from rural schools coming to talk to them. Beatrice believed that ‘looking into more of the debates about what rural placement is compared to metropolitan placement’ would be useful. Both her and Sophie felt ‘reasonably prepared’ to teach in the classroom but ‘in terms of living rurally and just general social things, probably it was a bit daunting’. Interestingly, when asked from where they accessed their information about rural schooling, they mentioned their peers and classmates in the teacher education program. That is, rural content in the teacher education curriculum was missing. This suggests that the location of the curriculum content needs spatializing to make space for rural places and schools content in the teacher education program (see White et al., 2011).

The root of the recognition problem of rural education appears to lie in the institutional pattern of cultural misrecognition in the teacher education program. In this program, it is evident through participants’ experiences that some knowledge and content are more valued than others. Furthermore, during the initial information session for rural placement, participants mentioned that content about rurality was overshadowed by urban schooling discussions but also by the international school internship placement program; which were given a more prominence during the seminar information evening. Following Fraser (1997; 2003), this misrecognition of the value of a rural placement deprives rural schools of potential material resources (e.g. staffing) but also devalues the cultural experience of a rural school placement in

the eyes of pre-service teachers. It is perhaps then unsurprising that participants offered deficit views of rural schooling and that they were attracted to it as a challenging rather than rewarding experience. The rural placement serves primordially as a time and space of preparation, skilling-up, and to strengthen their resumes to take a teaching post in an urban school. Therefore, rural schools appeared to be simply a means to an end.

Concluding Remarks

It is clear that participants' claims are deeply anchored in a politics of distribution that can deliver a level playing field for rural students and staff vis a vis their urban counterparts. Participants' comments on material issues were geared towards equality through a proper distribution of resources. At the core of this claim for equality is an understanding that education has the capacity to contribute to an individual's upward social mobility as well as reproducing societal inequalities. As Rawls (1972) stated, major social institutions, such as schools, play a crucial role in the allocation of goods, benefits and burdens and in opening up opportunities later in life (e.g. in the labour market). This equality of appropriate allocation of resources is then the basis for ensuring equal educational opportunity for all in society (Brighouse, 2010; Howe, 1997). This cry for equality, including overcoming geographical disparities, has a long-standing presence in Australian education policy. Education policies such as the Adelaide Declaration in 1999 and the Federalist papers in 2007 have asserted that schooling 'should be free from differences arising from student's socioeconomic background or geographic location' (MCEETYA, 1999, p. 3), and that Federal and State policies should be socially just (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007). This emphasis on the proper distribution of resources is confirmed by the latest national Review on Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey, 2018).

To this requirement for a better distribution of resources, research and policy has added the need to ensure that pre-service teachers complete a rural placement (Halsey, 2009; 2018; Sharplin, 2009). As mentioned above, this entails a distributive matter, providing staffing to rural schools, but also a recognition issue through the institutional valorization of rural placement as a valuable professional pathway for pre-service teachers. The recognition side also has the capacity to counterbalance the deficit view that is placed in education research and policy of rural schooling (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Green & Reid, 2004; HREOC, 2000; Halsey, 2018).

Participants' comments about the lack of rural content in the teacher education program, however, reflect the cultural status of rural schooling as a second-rate member of the teaching placement program. This issue does not pertain to this higher education institution alone. The lack of rural education content in education policy and research is a national and international problem. Several research studies showed that while university teacher education programs strive to include rural placements, in many instances these are optional and compete with urban placements and attractive international practicums (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Kline et al., 2013). And while rural placements are seen as positive to develop what is termed 'place consciousness' (Kline et al., 2013) and 'rural knowledges' (Adie & Barton, 2012); ultimately, it is argued that six weeks placement might not be enough to entice pre-service teachers to take a rural post (Adie & Barton, 2012; Downes & Roberts, 2018). Furthermore, rural

education has traditionally been located in the periphery of education research, policy and practice, and in constant comparison to urban education as the norm (Brennan, 2005; Cuervo, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2014). Of course there is an important emerging literature, beyond the one cited in this article, in rural education research that addresses the connection of teacher education themes to land, sustainability and community issues (see Beaton et al., 2019; Corbett & Gereluk, 2020); as well as research on the impact of the marketisation of education on rural schooling (Kučerová, Blaha & Pavlasova, 2015; Kučerová, Šmíd & Gristy, 2019); and new methodological approaches to rural education research (Gristy, 2014; Kvalsund & Hargreaves, 2014). Nevertheless, within the context and argument in this article, it is unsurprising that rural schooling is constantly underperforming when compared to the urban norm (the same argument has been presented in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous education in Australia – see Guenther, 2013).

A lack of recognition of rural education denies rural schools of participatory parity within the teaching placement program. Drawing on Fraser (2003, p. 29), the institutionalized pattern of cultural misrecognition of rural schools affects their participation, their status of equality and their capacity to participate on par with urban and international placement for the attraction of pre-service teachers. In turn, this misrecognition in the content and space within the program given to rural education issues and knowledge, generates from pre-service teachers who do not have an a priori knowledge or experience of rurality, also a misrecognition and, what Fraser would call, ‘status subordination’, in this case of the rural placement (2003, p. 29). This is what Fraser labels the status of recognition. Not a suffering of ‘distorted identity or impaired subjectivity’ but when ‘institutions (e.g. higher education institutions) structure interaction according to cultural norms that impede parity of participation’ to all social actors (e.g. urban, rural and international schools) within a system or society. The point, however, is not to reduce all aspects of economic justice (e.g. lack of staffing) to issues of cultural justice but to acknowledge that in many instances, although not always, social injustices might need both distributive and recognition remediation (Fraser, 2003; Young, 1990).

The problem of lack of rural placement opportunities and of rural teaching content in teacher education programs and curriculum in higher education is a problem of misrecognition of cultural value of rural schooling. As Green and Letts (2007) have put it, rural schools and communities are simply imagined as places ‘out there’, devoid of cultural significance, by the metropolitan norm. Thus, I argue that a solution to this perennial problem should also encompass a politics of recognition that puts “place” as a significant category to understand the complexities and challenges of rural staffing and teaching. In other words, the problem of rural staffing seems to be anchored in the economic dimension of justice but also one of ‘status order’; that is, a problem of cultural recognition by policy, higher education institutions and by practitioners.

In sum, the comments of participants illustrate the importance that a politics of distribution has in making the placement experience positive and rewarding for pre-service teachers to consider a potential rural teaching job. Participants’ comments, however, also reveal the power of a politics of place when weighing up their future teaching options. In other words, participants reveal in their comments and experiences a blindness towards what teaching in a rural place entails. Ultimately, the

solution to rural school staffing needs is a plural social justice approach (see Fraser 2008; Young, 1990). Thus, the solution lies in a more appropriate distribution of resources but also on emphasizing a politics of recognition through the emplacement of “place” as a significant variable to solve this perennial problem.

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