

Spatial engagement: The navigation of a novice teaching principal in a small rural community

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Abstract

This article proceeds from the contention that rural spaces present particular challenges for teaching principals of small schools. These challenges are compounded for the novice principal in the first few months of appointment (and perhaps even more so for females) when it can often appear that “extraordinary spaces are emerging in ordinary places” (Buchanan, 1997). We employ narrative accounts written in the voice of a novice teaching principal to chronicle ways in which the (female) incumbent deals with and makes sense of the spatial influences on her work. We also examine how the incumbent’s construction of her professional identity is affected by her experiences in the first few months of performing the role. The work concludes with a discussion of the implications for the preparation and development of teaching principals who might encounter such challenging spaces.

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Introduction

The reasons for our interest in leadership of small rural schools have been elaborated elsewhere (Clarke & Stevens, 2004; Clarke & Wildy, 2004; Wildy & Clarke, 2005); nevertheless, it is worth reiterating them briefly in the context of this article. The first reason for our interest in leadership of small schools is numerical significance: a quarter of all schools in the Queensland state education system are small, catering for fewer than 100 students, and led by a principal who has a substantial teaching commitment (Lester, 2001). The majority of these small schools are located in rural, remote and isolated environments. There are similar proportions of small schools in other Australian states.

Another reason for our interest in leadership of small rural schools is because of its impact in these situations. Mohr (2000) suggests that principals of small schools are much more immediately important to the day-to-day running of their organisations than their counterparts in larger schools because of the different way small school communities relate to their leaders. Likewise, Weston (2000) argues that the paramount influence of the principal in English small schools is underlined by inspection evidence. According to this evidence, principals of those establishments tend to have more direct influence on the quality of teaching that

provides them with powerful opportunities to bring about change and improvement.

Opportunities to implement and sustain school improvement initiatives, however, will be influenced by the extended and vital role that small schools perform in the community (Nolan, 1998). This characteristic, of course, is especially evident when they are located in regional, rural and isolated areas, and represents another reason for our interest in leadership of small rural schools. It is also in these more remote environments that parents may have little option but to accept the educational provision on offer from the local school. It is therefore critical for the promotion of social justice and equity to ensure that children in these small schools have as many educational advantages as they would elsewhere, placing a formidable responsibility on the teaching principals who have to work within these circumstances.

A challenging space

The circumstances surrounding small school leadership have become extremely challenging. The remote location of many small schools means that the repertoire of skills expected from teaching principals tends to exceed that of their urban counterparts who have access to readily available community support agencies. Moreover, the challenges of small school principalship are accentuated because positions are often taken up by those who are at the beginning of their career and whose preparation for the position is often inadequate for dealing with the complexities of the role.

The complexities of being a teaching principal in a rural, remote or isolated small school have been compounded by the trend towards school-based management. These small schools are now subjected to heightened expectations as well as growing demands for accountability from parents, system administrators and policy makers (Dunning, 1993; Weston, 2000). The additional demands of leadership and management imposed on teaching principals may be manifested in the so-called “double load” – the tension that arises between the professional concerns of teaching, and the demands of management and leadership (Dunning). Not surprisingly, these competing demands on teaching principals can lead to role conflict that may cause tensions as the responsibilities of these roles are exercised. Problems associated with role conflict could also be accentuated by the isolation of many small schools, insofar as it restricts opportunities for teaching principals to exchange views and practice with colleagues.

Isolation may also correlate with conservative attitudes in the community (Nolan, 1998), representing a further challenge that may confront the teaching principal in these settings. Indeed, it is the challenges often encountered by the principal in engaging with rural communities that reveal some of the social and cognitive functions of spatiality. For example, rural communities contain cultures that tend to prescribe the behaviour of residents and in particular the behaviour of teaching principals (Yarrow, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). If teaching principals have difficulty in learning and displaying the types of behaviours expected of them in rural settings, they may encounter “socio-cultural dislocation” or spatial exclusion that thwarts their attempts to interact with the community (Lunn, 1997).

In similar vein, The Commonwealth Schools Commission’s Report on Schooling in Rural Australia (1988) suggested that there is a tendency for members of rural communities to have feelings of being under threat and of not being understood by

city dwellers. Rural communities expect teachers to understand and relate to rural life (notwithstanding that their rural teaching appointment may be their first venture beyond city life), to live in the community and participate in local organizations, and to act as role models and maintain an appropriate standard of behaviour, professionally and socially. In parallel with these expectations, teachers considered personality and social factors to be critical in making a success of rural postings. In particular, they emphasised the desirability of an outgoing personality, a positive attitude towards rural people and places, and personal and social adaptability.

From this perspective, a rural community can be seen as a spatial realm that is imbued with particular understandings of behavioural appropriateness and cultural expectations; a reminder, perhaps, that “we are located in space, but we act in place” (Harrison & Dourish, cited in Nova, 2004, p. 20). Closely associated with this idea that space is invested with meaning through a sense of place is the notion of ‘territoriality’.

According to Nova (2004) there are five main dimensions of territoriality, each of which has relevance to the challenges encountered by a teaching principal in dealing with rural communities. Territoriality:

1. engenders places being endowed with a set of allowed behaviours
2. is linked to control that entails the capacity of an individual or a group to gain access to, to utilise, influence, establish ownership over and attach meaning to space
3. serves as a basis for a sense of personal and group identity that emerges from common territorial habits, knowledge and experiences
4. tends to involve trust because people who live in the same neighbourhood often trust one another
5. is associated with place attachment or a bonding to environmental settings often strengthened by interpersonal, community and cultural relationships.

Applied to rural communities, these spatial dimensions require that the principal, especially on first taking up appointment, is able to engage in a process of “social navigation” (Nova) through the space that will be guided and structured by the activities of others in that spatial domain.

The capacity to navigate the social and cognitive functions of spatiality might be especially difficult for women taking up the principalship in rural/remote schools because of a male-dominated ethos operating in these environments (Michael, 1996). From this perspective, parents and school community members view the leadership and management role of the principal through the traditional stereotype of the cane-wielding authoritarian who is probably a married man (D’Arcy, 1995). This observation highlights the significance of gender as a potentially restricting factor in using space. Certainly, male principals located in rural communities have historically been more able to control social space than their female counterparts.

Despite the additional challenges female teaching principals are likely to encounter when working in rural communities, an increasing number of women are now staffing many of the small and remote schools in Queensland (Michael, 1996). A similar trend is apparent in Western Australia. For example, of the 85 aspirants who applied for leadership positions in primary schools in the Western Australian Government School Rural Aspirant Program in 2003, 60 per cent were female. Furthermore, 12 per cent were younger than 30 years of age. Of the 17 who were appointed, 70 per cent were female and 8 per cent were under 30 years of age (Wildy & Clarke, 2005).

This article describes the experiences of one novice female teaching principal who was under 30 years of age when she encountered a rural environment in her first few months of appointment. It also discusses how the social and cognitive functions of spatiality are played out through her interactions with others within the school and throughout the community.

Methods

The case examined in this paper is part of a broader Queensland study (Clarke & Stevens, 2004) conducted in 2004 and aimed at understanding how leaders of small schools in remote and rural locations deal with complexity in their work. The Queensland study, funded by Griffith University and Education Queensland, was undertaken in conjunction with a Western Australian (WA) study¹ funded by the Department of Education and Training, WA (Wildy, 2004).

Four schools were selected for the Queensland study. The selection process involved a purposive sample of four teaching principals in their first year in the role. To this end, teaching principals were nominated by the Executive Director of Schools in one Education District within South East Queensland. In order to make the study manageable, the chosen schools located no further than four and a half hours' drive from Brisbane.

In Queensland, principals typically begin their leadership career as principal of a small school classified as Band 5. Such schools have a student population of up to 80, and typically a combined teaching and non-teaching staff of 7 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) persons, (depending on the school's degree of complexity). Within the sample of four sites, the student population ranged from 28 to 35. Staffing for the sample sites was typically 2.75 FTE teaching staff and 1.3 FTE to 2.00 FTE non-teaching staff

The study comprised site visits to the four schools. Two researchers spent one evening with the principal and two days in the school and community. The site visits were followed by regular telephone and email interaction spread throughout a two-month period. As a postscript to the study the principal who is the subject of this paper was interviewed by telephone one year later.

Although the study employed multiple data sources, two forms of data collection were particularly significant in relation to this paper. First, principals were interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Second, discussions were conducted with local stakeholders such as community members to provide information about the community context in which the principal works. The discussions concentrated on the expectations parents and community members hold of their principals and the issues they consider important in their local school. All the interviews were audiotaped.

Immediately after each interview, narrative accounts were constructed collaboratively by the two researchers, both of whom had taken notes. These accounts were crafted around emerging themes, using as much as possible of the verbatim talk from the interview material. The tape recordings were replayed to check accuracy of data and then the written accounts were given to the participants for verification. In these ways, the researchers sought trustworthiness in matching

¹ We acknowledge the contribution of Dr Helen Wildy, Murdoch University, to the design and methodology of the study reported in this paper.

the constructed realities of the participants with the reconstructions attributed to them.

The accounts selected for this paper contain descriptive and factual information providing insights into the experiences of a female teaching principal in the first few months after her appointment. The selected accounts are written in the first person, in the voice of the principal, although one of them gives the perspective of a local resident.

The name of the principal in the selected accounts is a pseudonym. While the information about the principal and school and community contexts is accurate, the narrative accounts have been fictionalised to provide anonymity. For example, statements in some instances have been made general, rather than particular.

Kate's story

We selected aspects of “Kate’s story” to discuss in this article for three main reasons. First, she was the only female principal of the four participants in the study and her story provides some insight into how complex interactions of gender, community attitudes, and rurality/isolation impact women. Secondly, Kate had been appointed on a temporary basis, presenting another caveat in her attempts to initiate change. Thirdly, Kate’s story is rather unusual in the sense that she already belonged to the community in which the school where she was appointed was located. As will become apparent, this feature of her situation offered her a number of advantages, but it also, unexpectedly perhaps, made some aspects of her role more problematic.

Hence, Kate’s story is interesting from a spatial perspective because as a young female in a position of authority, Kate had the potential to disturb the existing sense of place within a rural community. Also, because she was already part of that community, the dynamics of territoriality would be played out in subtle ways as she re-entered that space as a novice – and acting – teaching principal. In other words, Kate was likely to experience this space differently as her attitudes and feelings changed in her new role.

The scene is set with the following story narrated by an Administrative Officer who has a long-standing association with the school and has acquired a strong sense of place.

Close binding

This has always been a good community to live in. The children are from established farming families, and now we’re getting the third or fourth generation at the school. Discipline is never a problem with these children because you know their families and their expectations, and therefore you know how to discipline those kids. Occasionally we have had itinerant families at the school, and then it is harder to discipline them because you don’t know the family background.

Most of the children here have their grandparents living in the area, and in many cases those people went to the school also. So they are still involved in the school somehow, and they all come along to Anzac Day parades and the break up days, which usually include parent/child events. We had elections recently; of the 100 people on the electoral roll, 70 were parents, grandparents or staff. The parents

see the school as absolutely central to the community, and say that when their children leave the school they lose touch with what's going on in the community. They get used to planning things around what is happening at the school. Quite often I have to keep sending the newsletter out to families whose children have left the school.

One thing which is difficult to manage in a small community like this is that you are always visible to the kids, and they can't differentiate between your private and professional life. You might have one drink at the club, and the next day the kids will tell you they saw you there and you were drunk. All the teachers get that, because they all live in the community.

The Teaching Principal is held in very high regard by the community, and is always treated very well. In the 24 years I've been associated with the school, we have had 12 TPs, including a few temporary ones. The parents didn't like that because they felt there was no direction for the school then. They want to know where the school is going. We've had a history of female principals here for the last 20 years. Early in the piece there was a very young girl who was good at her job and switched on, but she was not accepted by the community because she was not seen to have authority. The same characteristics in a young man would have been all right. Another one kept her maiden name, and had a househusband looking after their young child while she went to work, and that was not well accepted. Since then the parents are younger and better educated, and more accepting of females in an authority role.

(School Administrative Officer)

The story demonstrates some of the particular understandings of behavioural appropriateness and cultural expectations that are integral to this community. It is evident that Kate will need to develop an acute sensitivity to these sometimes-tacit norms if she is to be successful in gaining access to this space and achieving some influence over it. For this to happen she will need to develop a nuanced understanding of the community as quickly as possible, entailing an understanding of country life, an empathy with the community's values and a tolerance of its idiosyncrasies (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988). This sense of connection with the community is crucial to nurturing trusting relationships between a principal and the broader community and seeding the development of mutually beneficial school/community partnerships (Clarke & Wildy, 2004).

At least, her gender did not appear to be a restricting factor in Kate's ability and authority to exert some control over this spatial realm. Although the story suggests that young, female principals had experienced difficulties in being accepted by the community in the past, Kate was the latest in a recent succession of female principals at the school. Hence, it was no longer an expectation, as in the case of many similar communities, that the incumbent be a white, married man perceived as more stable, better able to manage discipline, and a more competent finance and resources manager (Michael, 1996, p. 16).

Furthermore, as the next story suggests, Kate was more readily accepted into this community, because in some ways she was already a part of it; a comment that reinforces Michael's observation (1996) that women who come from a rural background have an advantage in gaining confidence of and acceptance by the community.

Local girl

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

For the first P & C meeting I was a bit nervous. I’d prepared as well as I could, and had my principal’s report all ready, expecting quite a turnout as I knew they had a reputation for being a very involved school community who wanted to know absolutely everything that happened in the school. They are quite well educated, and a number of previous teachers from this school have remained in the community after marrying. But for this meeting, only six or seven parents showed up! I then realised that it’s when they all turn up that you need to be worried. Apparently they thought they knew enough about me to let me get on with it. They don’t give me feedback directly, but I hear about it in a roundabout way and it has been very positive.

The one thing I found difficult was feeling I had to make decisions quickly in front of parents when they asked me something; I’m the type who likes to get all the facts and go away and think about it, so I found that a bit awkward at first, but I’m a bit better now about saying, “Let me think about that and I’ll get back to you”. The parents weren’t concerned about whether I was going to hang around, and they weren’t worried about how I would discipline because they’d heard I was firm but fair in the classroom, and they were happy with that. I seemed to be doing all the right things, apparently. They also didn’t mind getting another woman, as they’d usually had female Teaching Principals. Also, they felt I knew about life in the country, and the time demands that involves, like when the kids are needed for branding. So acceptance by the community was not a problem for me.

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

(Teaching Principal, Kate)

Although Kate is helped in adjusting to her role by her intimate knowledge of the community, she is beginning to view its spatial dimensions from a different perspective. This changing perspective is influenced, perhaps, by her growing awareness of a new professional identity and an acknowledgement that acting in accordance with this identity will have an impact on the nature of her social relations with others in the community. In particular, she has recognised that if she is to initiate and sustain school improvement, it will be necessary to confront certain behaviours among teachers and parents that make it difficult to implement change. This challenge is likely to be compounded because of her acting capacity as teaching principal. It is clearly going to be more difficult for Kate to gain access to this space and develop an influence over it if she is considered to be an interloper by members of the community.

Kate anticipates that if she exercises good interpersonal communication and works collaboratively, she will be able to deal with the complexities of her new role. Therefore, she was not prepared for the impasse described in the next story.

Pupil free day

It's been trickier than I expected dealing with staff. My second teacher position is shared by two local women, and each teaches half the week. So I never have all the staff there at once. Therefore I was intending to use the pupil free days for some shared planning. What I then discovered was that they had always taken the pupil free days off. Often the pupil free days are used by boarding schools and colleges for parent teacher interviews, and these women were accustomed to using this day for dealing with their families' affairs.

I was caught between a rock and a hard place, because I had asked for time similarly in my last job. But I knew that pupil free days were really important for us here because it was the only time that we could get together and discuss all those sorts of planning things. I worried about how to deal with this problem, and decided to ask them to come in one day in the holidays instead. This suggestion did not go down well, so eventually I said, "OK, don't worry about the holidays, we'll just have to catch up after school or something". I then said that I would be really concerned if they asked for another day like this off, and they got a bit upset, as obviously the same situation is probably going to arise next semester.

I worried that I might have handled the situation wrongly and I thought, "Am I out of line to have said this?". I thought I might have been a bit hard, as I've never had to be the bad guy, or the person who said no, but then this compromise was going to involve extra time for me, and I pointed this out to them. They seemed more accepting of the arrangement then.

I wouldn't have this problem if there was just one full time teacher – it sort of creates double the trouble. But it's not just that. There is a reluctance among the staff to change existing patterns and routines, and as I am on a temporary appointment, I don't feel I can change things too much in case I don't get to stay.
(Teaching Principal, Kate)

This story describes how teachers at the school had evolved definite ways of doing things – in this case using pupil free days to deal with family affairs. This arrangement was taken for granted by the teachers and was likely to create confrontation if challenged by Kate. In fact, this issue demonstrates that the use of space is very much concerned with human territoriality. The teachers are possessive about their use of the pupil free days and quite prepared to defend the existing arrangement. This is in spite of the obvious professional benefits that would be derived from Kate's proposal. On this occasion, Kate is unable to exert control over this segment of space and it seems reasonable to assume that the teachers will require more convincing before they are prepared to change their ways of operating. Once again, Kate's temporary status is recognised as a restricting factor in her ability to assert her position on the issue.

The interplay between Kate's space and the teachers' space is further demonstrated in the next story. As a novice teaching principal, Kate acknowledged that thus far in her career opportunities to exercise leadership had been limited, but she recognised that her style was naturally collaborative, and was aware that clear communication was essential. With a small staff, she anticipated that it would be relatively easy to maintain communication on a day-to-day basis. She was wrong.

The grapevine

There were a lot of things I wanted to share with staff and at first I thought these could be done in staff meetings, but I soon realised they couldn't because of the difficulty of getting people together. Some of the staff had not done Productive Pedagogies or Code of Conduct, for example, so there was a lot of material that I needed to communicate to them. Also, I found that just informing them about things like behavioural issues with students was proving difficult, as we're so higgledy piggledy here with staff timetables.

So I started "The Grapevine", which I write on my Friday admin day and put in their in trays on Friday afternoon. I have to email it to one teacher who only comes in at the beginning of the week. This way, it saves me from repeating information up to five times, and if someone doesn't know about an issue I can just say, "Did you read your Grapevine? Well that's why you're out of the loop".

That's the sort of thing you find in a big school – but I didn't expect this communication problem with just a few staff!
(Teaching Principal, Kate)

From Kate's perspective then, effective communication is important for fostering a collaborative approach to school matters. Furthermore, it should be relatively straightforward to achieve when there are few staff. Perhaps, however, she had been wrong-footed, for she did not consider the reasons that might have been behind the existing ways of operating. It is conceivable, for example, that the staff did not see communication as a problem because it had always been 'the way they did things around here'. These patterns of communication had been shaped by unspoken rules and expectations as well as activities which had evolved into a culture of solidarity and comfortable co-existence. It is also possible, therefore, that staff perceived Kate to be encroaching in their spatial domain and they did not share her desire to develop more efficient channels of communication.

Indeed, as Kate's identity as principal began to sharpen, she was becoming more aware that the nature of her interaction with others must change. Within the school, she understood that she needed to treat some situations differently as a principal than she had been accustomed to as a classroom teacher. Within the community too, she understood that her interactions, even with those she knew well, would be different. She was no longer just another local girl. On the contrary, her decisions and actions now had possible ramifications for the whole community and would be closely scrutinised by all within the locale. Inadvertently, she was beginning to learn that space tends to be constructed through processes of social interaction and power relations.

These processes are evident in the next story illustrating how Kate realised that her dealings with parents are not always straightforward now that she is a teaching principal.

Toddler taming

The parents know what our teaching times are, and in the newsletter I have said that if they want to contact the school, they should do so in the non-teaching times. Some parents don't respect that – they ring at inopportune times, knowing that one of the teaching staff will have to answer. Sometimes they will turn up at the door while I'm teaching, and I feel obliged to see them because they've made the effort to come up to the school, but it is disruptive to learning for me to stop what I'm doing.

What I try to do is acknowledge the parents and then get the children to a point where they can work by themselves for a short time, and say to them, "You keep working for a few moments while I am speaking here", and then I tell the parent I have a moment to speak to them. After that I will put a reminder note in the next newsletter about the appropriate times to contact the school, but you can bet that the phone will not ring before 9 am, and it will still ring at 10 past 9.

Another thing I wasn't used to was parents wandering in and out of the classroom. It's not such a bad thing, it's just that it hadn't happened to me before. Parents also come into the classroom to teach religion, and when they do they just sort of take over – move desks, use the photocopier and stapler and so on even if it involves shifting things on our desks to do so. It hasn't been a big problem, but I did say once to put things back where you found them. One of the parents brings her toddler in on these days, and he just makes himself at home – he grabs texts and draws on scrap paper, he tinkers with things, gets caught up in the rubber band box. Occasionally she'll put her head around the corner and check on him and say "oh sorry", but usually he just does what he wants.

I haven't worked out how to deal with this situation yet – whether the disruption from the child is big enough to risk a confrontation, or whether it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. You have to be careful what you say, and how it might be misinterpreted in a small community, because if you tick off one person others might be affected. They're the sorts of prickly issues I've had to deal with – finding tactful ways of making parents do the right thing, basically.
(Teaching Principal, Kate)

Kate has again encountered shared understandings of behavioural appropriateness that have become well established within the school, this time amongst the parents. Clearly, these parents have different ideas from Kate about the acceptable use of this space. What is more, they appear to have a good deal of control over this space at the expense of Kate. In other words, it is they who decide when and where they can have access to space to within the school. It is they who have some choice about the kind of activity that occurs in the space and, at least for the time being, they have the ability to resist Kate's attempts to exert her control over the space. In terms of Nova's (2004) dimensions of territoriality, it is the parents who have control over this space which they are not ready to relinquish to Kate.

The main reason for the parents' continued control over the use of this space is Kate's tentativeness in tackling the issue. This is partly attributable to her lack of experience in her role, but more importantly it is because of her intimate knowledge of the social dynamics of the community. She is, after all, an insider

who has shared the rest of the community's sense of place and she can anticipate the implications of disturbing customary ways of doing things. Paradoxically, it is this heightened awareness of people's sensitivities engendered by her insider status that inhibits her decisiveness in dealing with particular issues and sometimes creates discomfort in exercising her role. Her objective of "finding tactful ways of making parents do the right thing" could become a challenge because she now has to define what the right thing is with an insider's insight and an outsider's imperative, all the more challenging because of her temporary standing as teaching principal.

A similar situation involving parents is described in the next story. This time, a more definite action is required from Kate because it involves duty of care.

Roll call

There are a few parents who pick up their children from school in the afternoon. Sometimes they take other children home too, but they don't tell anyone at school that they have given a lift to a couple more kids.

A few weeks ago, the first bus had gone and I was supervising the remaining children on the side oval. At one point I noticed a mother walking down the steps with her child; I gave her a half wave and turned my attention back to the children. When the bus arrived and I called the roll, two children were missing – her child, and another who I knew sometimes gets a lift with her. Now it had only been by chance that I had seen that mother. If I hadn't, there would have been a panic – was the child bitten by a snake? Run away? Anything. This is a completely unacceptable situation so I wrote a story in the Newsletter describing what had happened, without naming anyone. I thought this non-direct attack might resolve the issue, rather than speaking directly to that one mother, because it wasn't an isolated incident. I used the story to inform parents that if they took other children home besides their own, it was essential to inform the school of the arrangement.

Fortunately, this had the desired impact. The day after the Newsletter went out six or seven parents came up to me and said, "Was that story about me? If it was I'm really sorry". Since then, we haven't had any problems accounting for children getting on the bus.
(Teaching Principal, Kate)

Such a situation, of course, could arise at any school, but in a small school environment within a very close community, it is assumed that everyone just knows what is going on. This is simply the way people are inclined to behave in small rural communities where people have learned to trust and depend on each other; these are the assumed givens of social existence (Geertz, 1975; Nova, 2004). Kate, however, cannot rely on such informal arrangements for picking children up from school – there is too much left to chance. Once again, Kate is displaying a different spatial orientation from the parents because of her emerging professional identity. She is indeed encountering extraordinary space in what had been, until assuming her principalship, a seemingly ordinary place.

One year on: A postscript

A telephone interview with Kate 18 months into her principalship (one year on from the interviews which informed this paper) revealed that she has been successful in gaining access to and achieving considerable influence over her spatial realm. She has resolved some of the tensions with staff and parents who challenged her when she took on the role, she has overseen an expansion in student enrolments, addressed particular problems such as high absenteeism, and improved student outcomes. Overall, she seems to have “taken hold” of her role after her initial “entry and encounter” (Weindling, 1999).

Kate reflected that on assuming the role she had been rather unsure of what was expected of her: for a while she just did not know what to do. Now, however, she is “firming up” as she puts it, and developing her ability to assert herself. Kate’s increased confidence in her role is attributable in large part to her change in status: she had been appointed in an acting capacity for one year but discovered after six months that the person she was replacing would not be returning from leave and the position would be advertised. From this point on, she felt she had greater operational discretion in making decisions and became more assertive in her interactions with others. The parent community had observed the results of her leadership at the school and appeared satisfied with her performance. Now Kate has refined her ways of operating in order to pursue the process of “social navigation” (Nova, 2004) as adroitly as possible.

In “Toddler taming”, Kate referred to dealing with “prickly issues” that would require “finding tactful ways of making parents do the right thing”. Her concern about “not treading on toes”, a concern pre-eminent in the earlier narrative account, was considerably ameliorated one year on as she reflected on her successes in consolidating her position. She was finding that some of the issues dissolved through a change in circumstances – use of the pupil free day for planning, for example, was no longer an issue after a timetable reschedule enabled her part-time teachers to come in to school on the same day. Other issues were resolved by her persistent reminders to the school community at large, for example, by using the newsletter to remind parents that calling the school during teaching times was detrimental to students’ learning.

One of the biggest challenges for Kate in taking up the position had been how to implement change when staff had evolved such definite ways of doing things. While Kate acknowledged at the outset that she was wary of initiating change because she was only acting in the position, she felt a greater resolve to change certain behaviours once her appointment was made permanent. Kate had experienced several months in which to build up the trust of others in this spatial domain and she had gained a new sense of efficacy in implementing change. She remained, however, acutely aware of the community’s idiosyncrasies. On the one hand, her confidence that she had been accepted by the community and that her status was recognised by staff and parents empowered her to extend her influence over their shared space. On the other hand, her sensitivity to the community’s cultural norms determined that a cautious approach to navigating these attitudes and behaviours be adopted.

Hence, while there were a number of changes she was keen to implement immediately, she instead “floated” each new idea to allow people to get used to it. In cases where there was great reluctance to embrace the proposed change, this strategy allowed people to go through a “grief process” before the eventuality, in other words, a process of letting go of entrenched ways of doing things. This

sensitivity to the culture of the community appears to have been rewarded, as Kate is increasingly able to exert her authority in pursuit of school improvement. Her spatial engagement, in other words, had been consolidated.

Concluding comments

In this article we have reiterated the argument that the role of the teaching principal in rural communities is extremely challenging (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Wildy, 2004). The challenges of the role are likely to be accentuated for novice principals in their first few months of appointment and compounded further if the incumbent is a young, single female. The article has also sought to describe and analyse ways in which some of these challenges are manifested in the day-to-day work of the novice principal, by adopting a spatial perspective.

In particular, there are two aspects of spatiality that serve as useful conceptual tools for making sense of novice teaching principals' early encounters with the school and its community. This is, of course, a time when they are developing a cognitive map of the complexities of the situation in which they find themselves (Weindling, 1999), especially the people, the problems and the issues, as well as the culture of the school and the community in which it is located.

The first aspect of spatiality that has a bearing is a sense of place or the identification with a place engendered by living in it (Agnew & Duncan, 1989, p. 2). Rural communities are distinguished by a profound sense of place because they are imbued with particular understandings of behavioural appropriateness and cultural expectations, some of which may appear unusual from the urban perspective that many novice teaching principals will have acquired before appointment. It is, however, essential that the novice teaching principal be attuned to the sense of place in order to be accepted and trusted by the community. An acute sensitivity to place is also desirable for understanding what must be done at the school in the short term and for envisaging what can be accomplished at the school in the longer term.

The second aspect of spatiality which is relevant to interpreting a novice teaching principal's early encounter of the role is the multi-dimensional notion of territoriality. In this paper it is the link between territoriality and control that has been especially evident. It is perhaps a motif of the selected accounts from Kate's story that ultimately the agency of a teaching principal in a rural community will be determined by his/her capacity to gain access to, to utilise, influence, establish some ownership over and attach meanings to, this particular spatial realm.

This examination of the complexity of the novice teaching principal's role from a spatial perspective suggests a number of ways in which the preparation of teaching principals could be enhanced. Given the importance of teaching principals in rural communities being able to navigate the attitudes and behaviours that are influenced by place and territoriality, it seems axiomatic that leadership development programmes should aim at developing knowledge of a variety of leadership skills and styles that go beyond routine management tasks. After all, the ability of a teaching principal to initiate, implement and sustain school improvement will rely heavily on the nature of interactions and partnerships within the community.

It also seems desirable, therefore, that leadership programmes tailored more specifically for the teaching principalship in remote/rural environments should focus on knowledge of the school in a community, how communities work and

how principals can interact effectively with community partners. It is acknowledged that this recommendation has implications regarding principals' emotional intelligence, a theme discussed more fully by Clarke, Stevens and Wildy (in press).

Linking these leadership programmes with “hands on” experience in collaboration with effective principals would strengthen the practical value of the programme and provide aspiring leaders with on the job learning. More specifically, principals of small rural and remote schools as well as system administrators require an intimate knowledge of the spatial realm into which they are appointed. In this connection, it might be worth examining the possibility of formal hand-overs between incoming and outgoing principals with input from appropriate system administrators and parents' associations. It would also be desirable for District Directors to take into account local aspects of place and territoriality in designating appointees to particular schools. For example, in some rural communities there appears to be a perception that young women do not make effective school leaders, in which case it is likely to be an inappropriate place for a young single female to experience her initiation into the teaching principalship. Other communities, which have encountered a rapid succession of teaching principals, are unlikely to be sanguine about a new incumbent being appointed on a temporary basis.

These are pragmatic strategies or even “spatial tactics” that could be adopted easily by educational jurisdictions. They reflect an awareness of the socio-cognitive functions of rural space and help to facilitate teaching principals' spatial engagement. Ultimately, it will be this spatial engagement that forges the sustainability of improvement in a small rural school.

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