Leading a small remote school:
In the face of a culture of acceptance

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This paper reports a study of one very small school in a remote location of Western Australia that seeks to contribute to answer the research question: What are the distinctive challenges facing leaders of small schools in bringing about changes to school cultures to improve student learning achievements?

Context

The study was part of a larger program investigating the challenges facing novice principals and the extent to which they felt they were adequately prepared to deal with the challenges they faced in the first three years of appointment. How principals are prepared in different contexts and how well their preparation fulfills their needs in their first three years is the focus of the International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP http://www.ucalgary.ca/~cwebber/ISPP/index.htm). The ISPP is based on the premise that ‘principal preparation is a crucial aspect of school development and progression, and that programs of preparation should have positive outcomes for those who undertake them’ (Cowie & Crawford, 2007 p. 129). This cross-continent study involves researchers and newly appointed principals from Australia, Canada, China, England, Germany, Jamaica, Mexico, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Tanzania, Turkey, and the United States.

In the Western Australian context, principals are appointed without formal leadership development, straight from the classroom, and continue as principals who also carry a substantial teaching load (Wildy & Clarke, 2008a). Novice principals expect, and are expected, to learn on the job. Such a journey to the principalship, although depicted in the literature as an ‘apprenticeship model’ with associated on-the-job theoretical and practical learning (Belmonte, 2007), is often characterised by variety, novelty and serendipity (Wildy, Clarke & Slater, 2007), without a grounding in leadership theory, practice or reflection.

In the Australian context, a small school is defined as one with at most 100 students. However, defining remoteness is somewhat contentious. In their Australian Council of Deans of Science report, Harris, Jensz and Baldwin (2005) identify five categories – highly accessible, accessible, moderately accessible, remote, and very remote – based on the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) codes developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Every location in Australia is given an accessibility/remoteness value between 0 and 15, based on the physical road distance to the nearest service centre. Using distance as an indicator of remoteness is pertinent in the Australian setting because the country is large – equivalent in area to China – but sparsely populated, having a population of 22.4 million compared with China’s population of 1.4 billion. The distance factor is even more relevant to Western Australia which comprises one-third of the continent and is populated by only 2.2 million people, most of whom are found on the lower south-east corner of the state.

Small rural and remote schools are significant in Australia because of their occurrence in various jurisdictions throughout the country. For example, in six of the eight jurisdictions - Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania and Victoria, - approximately 25 per cent of all government schools cater for fewer than 100 students (Wildy & Clarke, 2005). Nearly half of Northern Territory schools cater for fewer than 100 students. Given that small schools are responsible for providing education throughout a substantial proportion of Australia, they warrant close attention from policy makers, system administrators and researchers.

Literature Review

In this brief review of relevant literature, we present research into the context of small remote schools in Australia, as well as a discussion of the concept of culture that pertains to our study. In addition we define two concepts that underpin our approach – a culture of acceptance; and a culture of inquiry.
In a growing body of research about small schools two features are clear. First, small schools are generally undifferentiated, in theory and in policy documents, with the same expectations and accountabilities as larger schools but with fewer staff to carry out administrative and management tasks and where, in many settings school leaders, are also classroom teachers (Clarke & Wildy, 2004; 2010). Second, the context that renders a school small has a range of implications for the personal and professional life of school leaders: small schools tend to be located in small rural or remote communities and some of these present challenging circumstances, frequently isolated from peer networks and professional support, and in some jurisdictions these school leaders are in their first appointment (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Clarke, Wildy & Pepper, 2007). For many school leaders, the culture of the community in which they take up their appointments presents challenges: for example, the leader is highly visible; the community has expectations for the leader which may not be shared or valued by the leader; or the norms of the community are not understood by the leader (Clarke, Stevens & Wildy, 2006).

Third, and most evident, the academic and social achievements of students in small and remote schools are uneven and absenteeism and suspension rates are high (Barty et al., 2005). A range of issues relate to poverty and disadvantage in rural/remote communities. Many rural communities in Australia are considered to be in a state of crisis (Kilpatrick et al., 2002) because economic developments have brought about a decline in traditional industries such as agriculture, mining and manufacturing (Panizzon & Pegg, 2007). This downturn has been associated with unemployment and a declining population, which pose challenges for building and sustaining robust school-community partnerships. These difficulties are further compounded in Indigenous communities which are contending with chronic social and economic disadvantages. In such contexts successful schools engage the community in ways that enable specific and local needs to be identified and educational provision designed accordingly (Boston, 1999). In these challenging circumstances, small, rural and remote schools require the capacity to bring about change for learning improvement. From a social justice perspective the performance and vitality of these schools as well as the communities they serve are a crucial consideration because parents (and students) may have little option but to accept the educational provision on offer from the local school.

Small schools in remote areas have an added problem of attracting and retaining staff (Sharplin 2002). When new teachers and leaders arrive at a school, they do not always expect to stay for long. Their encounters with rural and remote communities are characterized by some writers as “nasty, brutish and short” and they do their time before returning to the city as quickly as possible (Ankrah-Dove, 1982, p. 11; Wallace & Boylan, 2007).

The distinctive challenges that beset small schools in rural and remote environments represent what Elmore (2006) describes as ‘hundred year problems’. In his address to the National Science Foundation Learning Network Conference in Washington, DC, Elmore spoke of problems that simply reinforce the wide variability in instructional practice across settings, when the focus of effort is directed towards consistency and alignment of resources with outcomes. The structural and staffing ‘hundred year problems’ in the context of small rural and remote schools are further reinforced by their cultural dimension.

For the purpose of our paper, we adopt a definition of culture based on the writing of anthropologists Bates and Plog (1990). Culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning (p.7). Aspects of this definition of relevance to our discussion are the shared nature of culture, that it is learned, that it is passed on and that the
beliefs and practices of a group help its members cope with the world in which they find themselves. However, although culture is implicit but rarely noticed from within, culture is pervasive and powerful and shapes that way of life.

The focus of our study is on the ways in which the culture of the group supported improvement in student achievement. The study of the links between culture and student performance is not new (Fullan, 2001; Lakomski, 2001; Taylor & Williams, 2001) and is conclusive in showing that the learning environment is closely, even causally, linked to improvement in student learning. We are particularly interested in these links because we know that although the effect of leadership on learning is indirect (Hallinger, Bickman & Davis, 1996; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mulford, Silins & Leithwood, 2004), principals’ influence on culture is direct and strong (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). Hence, for this study of one small remote school faced with challenging circumstances, we sought to examine the ways the principal influenced the culture to improve students’ learning.

We selected two theoretical constructs as the lens through which to examine the culture: a culture of acceptance; and a culture of inquiry. The term culture of acceptance derives from the studies of climate and culture and their effect on student learning. For example, MacNeil, Prater and Busch (2009) compared school climates on a continuum from 'exemplary' to 'recognized' to 'acceptable' and found schools with exemplary climates outperformed those with acceptable climates. The focus on values in Australian schools over the past decade has emphasized ten values - tolerance and understanding; respect; responsibility; social justice; excellence; care; inclusion and trust; honesty; freedom and being ethical (Centre for Policy and Development Systems, 2004). In relation to Indigenous Australians, schools across the nation have been actively encouraged to be aware of the consequences of cultural traditions and also to understand them and objectively assess their relevance (Centre for Policy and Development Systems, 2004). On the other hand, the concept of ‘zero tolerance’ pertains to the notion of non acceptance of certain behaviours such as bullying, physical and verbal abuse as well as substance abuse. A leader’s responsibility is therefore to distinguish between the attitudes and behaviours that are acceptable and to encourage these while also identifying and discouraging those that are not to be tolerated.

The term culture of inquiry (Rourke & Kanuka, 2008) derives from the field of evidence-based inquiry in which practitioners are challenged to provide and share performance data as evidence of student learning and has been applied extensively in online learning researchers such as Jacobsen, Cliford and Friesen (2002) in their study of the preparation of Canadian ICT teachers. A culture of inquiry is reflected in the values and behaviours of individuals engaging purposefully in critical discourse to generate personal meaning and mutual understanding (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). In the Australian context, national assessment data have increasingly been used in school decision making since the early 2000s (Wildy, 2004; Wildy & Styles, 2008a, 2008b). In this study we sought to examine the extent to which the principal negotiated what was acceptable in terms of behavior and attitudes, and to develop a culture of inquiry that would challenge the existing levels of student learning.

**Method**

Our study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm. We sought to understand the meaning that participants make of their world, through their beliefs, values, customs and behaviours. We position our research in the narrative inquiry tradition, bearing in mind the debate about data representation in educational research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Richardson, 1994). The writing and study of narratives is a theoretical and analytical tool to aid understanding complex issues of human behaviour. We believe the narrative is an effective means of showing, in an integrated way, the complexity and context of
principals’ work (Wildy & Clarke, 2008a; Wildy & Louden, 2000). Narrative accounts are creative reconstructions of information from observations, informal conversations and formal interviews, written in the first person from the perspective of the principal, with a title, a theme, and some dramatic action over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991). The action is set in a context and imbued with the emotion – feelings, attitudes, moods – of the narrator.

The site for this study was selected to align with the parameters of the larger ISPP project (Wildy & Clarke, 2008b, 2009): the principal was a novice, in the first three years of the principalship; the school was a government school (rather than an independent or Catholic sector school); and the school was a primary/elementary school, catering for students in their first seven years of schooling. In the Western Australian context, novice principals are most likely to be found in small schools and small schools are most likely to be found outside of metropolitan and regional centres.

The purposively selected school is 1 100 km north of the capital city of Western Australia, 460 km from the Indian Ocean and 303 km on an unsealed road from the nearest town and shopping centre. Access to the town is by regular, though infrequent, flights to one of three airports within 700 km of the school or by charter plane (in and out of the community in the same day) or by four-wheel drive vehicle. We chose the latter and drove for one and a half days to reach the school. We classify this school as very remote because of its distance from the nearest service centre.

This school is one of 47 remote schools in Western Australia catering for nearly 3 500 students aged between 3 and 17 years in an area comprising one-third of the continent. Although its remoteness is extreme it is by no means the most remote school in the state; nor is it the smallest. For example, 0.9 percent of the students in the state are educated in 4.2 per cent of the schools indicating that these remote schools are mostly very small. A total school enrolment of only 30 students aged in 12 school year groups is not uncommon and one school has an enrolment of only 7 students. The number of small schools in Western Australia is similar to those overall in Australia, although less extreme than in the Northern Territory and more extreme than in the populous states of New South Wales and Victoria (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

The school serves an Aboriginal community whose land is located near Australia’s largest monolith, Mt Augustus, and a uranium deposit. The 50 residences are administered by the community and house up to 15 people each so the population varies from 20 to 300 people. On the school roll are 61 students and the record number of attendees at any one time is 53 students. The staff comprises four classroom teachers, four teacher assistants, the principal, the registrar and a gardener/cleaner. There were 15 students at school during our visit.

The site visit took place in the winter of 2009 before the heat and humidity of summer set in. Data were collected from both formal and informal discussions with the principal and other staff members, and from field observations of the principal and teachers at work in the school and the community as well as at the principal’s home in the evening. We asked the principal and teachers to describe their work, the challenges they faced and their achievements. During the visit we wrote case notes about the school and its culture and compiled a report at the end of the two-day visit.

Findings

From the comprehensive report we selected three pieces of text and with minor editorial changes shaped these pieces into three narratives for the purpose of this paper. The focus of each is an aspect of the school culture, told from the perspective of the principal, using almost verbatim data. In this section of the paper we present the three narratives together with an analysis of each in terms of our two
theoretical lenses – culture of acceptance and culture of inquiry. Each narrative is prefaced by a brief introduction.

In the first narrative Attendance, the principal describes aspects of the culture of the community, of the school, and his own practices relating to students’ attendance.

**Attendance**

Some parents don’t worry too much about school. Families move around a fair bit. The students might be on our roll but come to school here only a couple of weeks in a year. They might go to another school but mostly they don’t bother. The Central Office might track them down; our registrar phones other schools to try to find them. I go round to the houses in the community regularly and talk to the parents. However, many children simply don’t go to school. I think that it is the responsibility of families to get an education for their children. We offer it to them but we can’t make them come to school. All we can do is make our programs engaging, stimulating and relevant.

There are many other reasons for non attendance. The most powerful is the funeral ritual. Later this week two funerals are scheduled in towns in this part of the state. All families are related up here. It is customary for all relatives to attend funerals, even when this entails a couple of days driving each way. By the end of this week I expect the only students at school will be the children of the teachers. Even our teacher assistants will attend the funerals.

I am happiest when the school is humming along. I wake up in the morning and get up with a spring in my step. I look forward to going over to the school. I am confident our students are learning. Teachers are getting along. The parents are not complaining. I don’t have system people breathing down my neck or demanding reports from me. I am best at getting along with people. My greatest success here has been to build good relationships among teachers, throughout the community and between students. I feel comfortable to talk to parents. I walk around the houses, and knock on the door if I want to talk to a family. I never go inside a house: that’s out of bounds. If I see a bunch of old ladies sitting around the fire outside I go up to them and have a chat. I like to be out, talking with the parents and families. They know who I am and what I stand for. It’s humming along nicely now. But it has not always been like this.

In analyzing this narrative, the questions posed are: What aspects of the school, community and self are being accepted? and What aspects of the school, community and self are being challenged?

The principal accepts the low attendance of students, and that parents, not the school or the principal, are responsible for their children’s participation in education. He respects the culture of the local community and understands that even his teachers will take several days off to participate in the funeral rituals. And he is sensitive to the boundaries of access to the community that prevent him entering residences. In relation to his understanding of his own practices, he values teachers ‘getting along’, the school ‘humming along’ and that the community knows who he is and what he stands for. He also values being away from the surveillance of his line managers.

On the other hand, harmonious relationships among staff, with the community and within the community have not always existed and he has worked hard to make them so. While this principal may not challenge the low attendance of students, and staff, he does not tolerate divided or fractious relationships.
In the second narrative Teaching and Learning, the principal describes aspects of the culture of the school relating to by whom, how and what students are taught.

**Teaching and Learning**

This year all our teachers are new to the school and inexperienced as teachers. However, they are not young. Each brings a former career and many rich life experiences. For example, our one male teacher, though recently graduated, was formerly an opera singer and he brings a background of art, music and drama to his specialist teaching responsibilities in these fields. The early years teacher, an Indigenous women, and unofficially our deputy principal, grew up in this part of the state and spent some years as an assistant before undertaking studies to qualify her to teach.

The middle primary teacher has Years 3 to 6 classes. Prior to training as a teacher, she worked as a theatre nurse and travelled the world. She is here this year, in her first year of teaching, with her 13 year old daughter who had previously attended a prestigious and competitive academic school in the city. This young girl is now beginning her secondary schooling at our school, as one of a dozen or so secondary students, ranging up to 17 years of age. This group has one teacher, another new graduate, who teaches all subject areas through literacy and numeracy. That this teacher trained as a primary teacher is not a drawback: in fact she is perfectly suited to her students who achieve at low to middle primary level. Our challenge though is to cater for the teacher’s 13 year old daughter. I wonder how we can provide her with a rich curriculum of learning areas and experiences that will prepare her for tertiary entrance in the future.

Our students love Art. Our strategy therefore is to link as much as we can to Art. For example, all the buildings are decorated with murals; the classroom doors feature local issues graphically, such as hunting, the rains and animals. The older students do Mathematics using a set of activities in which answers to calculations are matched to segments of a picture which, if all are answered correctly, will generate a complete image; students then colour in the picture and put this on the wall for display. You see the walls are covered with these types of pictures. Another example is the task the art specialist has set these older students: redesign the art room to make it more like a gallery. They were offered the opportunity to look at images of art galleries on the internet then clean up and rearrange the furniture and walls to set up exhibitions of students’ work. Students are well-mannered and happily engage in this activity today.

In examining this narrative, the questions posed are: What aspects of the teaching and learning are being accepted? and What aspects of the teaching and learning are being challenged? The principal accepts the teaching staff allocated to the school, even though they may not be an optimal fit with the age range of the students in the school. He believes that the teaching of Mathematics through colouring is appropriate because the students love Art. Decorating the walls of the classrooms with pictures coloured during Mathematics lessons, decorating the buildings with murals, and arranging a classroom to look like an Art gallery are considered acceptable teaching and learning activities. That students are ‘well-mannered and happily engaged’ fits with his preference for a school that is 'humming along' and there are ‘no complaints' from parents.

However, the principal does not challenge the narrow range of teaching and learning that is being pursued in the school. Activities designed to question the low level of performance, for example, on national assessment of Literacy and Numeracy, are not discussed nor is their evidence of staff talking about strategies for improving learning. Humming along, not complaining, getting along, being happily engaged – these are the features of the school’s culture that are evident in the first two narratives.
In the third narrative Resources, the principal describes aspects of the culture of the school and its community relating to feeding the students and the implications for students' learning.

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| While the community is rich in material goods, it is chronically short of food. I don’t know what the community folk eat. We go to town, 303 km away, and buy $1000 worth of groceries for our family and for the school. We provide apples and oranges for the students at morning recess. When the community people go to town they buy only what they can afford and that doesn’t last long. Adults receive government living allowances but often this is used for alcohol. The local shop no longer operates because it ran into deep debt. When it did operate, the owners would go to town and bring back pies, soft drinks and chips to sell. These didn’t last long.

There used to be a Women’s Group who met in a house next to the school and prepared lunches for the students. Since the funding for this was withdrawn the students aren’t provided with lunch. At lunch time my two daughters eat their sandwiches and fruit that we prepare for them. Some of the Aboriginal students have lunch with them; usually they go home but sometimes there is little food for them so they just ride around on their bikes until the siren goes for the start of the afternoon session. When the families go off to funerals they fill their cars with five to 10 people so there is no room for their dogs. Each family has 5 or 6 dogs and these are left at the community. The dogs roam the streets, looking for food. After a few days they are hungry, barking, snarling, jumping our fences, getting into our bins. It is hard to imagine how students can concentrate on their learning programs in a context like this.

Despite the lack of food, the students are healthy. We are lucky that this community does not have a tradition of petrol sniffing, alcohol abuse or other drugs. It is not a designated dry community so members do buy alcohol from town and bring it in. There might be a drinking party lasting for a few days. We hear the loud music all through the community. No one gets much sleep. After a few days we are exhausted and irritable, and the whole community is unsettled. This is when disagreements break out, and at times there is violence in the community. On the whole, compared with many other similar settings, our community is peaceful for most of the year.

In exploring this narrative, the questions posed are: What aspects of the school’s resources are being accepted? and What aspects are being challenged? The principal accepts that hunger is a permanent feature of the school, set as it is in a community over 300 km from the nearest shopping centre, with no means of food production. He understands that the local shop could not be viably managed by the community and that the government allowances are most often used to buy alcohol. He appreciates that, unlike communities in similar settings, his community does not engage in petrol sniffing or drugs with the attendant serious behavioural problems. He tolerates the bad behavior that inevitably follows a few days of drinking by some members of the community. He even tolerates the violence that erupts on these occasions, knowing that it is a predictable but isolated occurrence. As he concludes: 'On the whole, . . .our community is peaceful for most of the year'.

In summary, the culture of this small remote school can be characterized as having low expectations of student learning low; staffing profiles that were likely to limit the potential of students to achieve at an national age-equivalent level; fragmented parent engagement with student learning; and (iv) little evidence of innovative practice to challenge the culture of acceptance of low student achievement.
Implications and Conclusions

A prerequisite for strong leadership of small schools is an intimate knowledge and understanding of place (Clarke & Wildy, 2010; Wildy & Clarke, 2008b). School leaders who deeply understand and appreciate the complexities of their context, as well as the culture of the school and the community are strengthened in their confidence to deal with local issues and problems. Such awareness has been termed ‘contextual literacy’ (NCCL, 2007). The term derives from literary studies, meaning that the way we read and understand the context of a piece of work influences our understanding of that piece (Haigler, 1989). Applying the term to the subject of this paper, ‘literacy’ entails familiarity with the socio-economic, demographic, cultural and historical composition of the community. At the school level, contextual literacy implies gathering data about students’ achievement and progress, turning such data into useful information and then into strategies for action. We contend in this paper that principals who focus on student learning have the ability to read the contextual circumstances so they can be responsive to the situation in which they find their school. In terms of our argument, the contextual literate principal has the skills and understanding to effect a school level transition from a culture of acceptance to a culture of inquiry.

However, to develop cultures that challenge the low levels of achievement that frequently characterize small remote schools is not a simple matter. Our study suggests that leaders are unlikely to bring about cultural change without support and guidance. The first, and perhaps most difficult, challenge for the principal is to make explicit the values and beliefs that underpin the existing culture. This challenge is difficult precisely because cultural norms are implicit, taken for granted and enacted through tradition. To bring to the surface the values and beliefs that give rise to the customary practices of any organization requires objectivity and process as well as motivation. Principals of schools like the one described in this paper can be supported to find a process that will help them and their staff members to identify the nature of the culture of their school. The second challenge is to ascertain whether the existing culture is to be changed or retained, at the level of rhetoric and at the level of action. The third challenge is to begin to reshape the culture. While agreement can be reached that the existing culture of acceptance is not the preferred culture, the challenge for the principal and members of staff is to identify and put into place those everyday actions that lead to a culture of inquiry. Keeping up the momentum to change requires long term commitment, and this is where support and guidance is needed. Sometimes, when times are tough – as this case study has shown – it is challenging simply to survive.

The skills required to bring about a shift in culture are not managerial or administrative. Although high levels of management and administration help to make schools function smoothly, these are not the skills that bring about culture shifts. Indeed they are the skills that reinforce the existing patterns of behavior. Leadership is needed to make transformative changes in the norms and beliefs of a group of people. For a principal to initiate, implement and sustain school improvement the nature of interactions and partnerships within the community will require refocusing. It also seems desirable, therefore, that leadership programs tailored more specifically for the principalship in remote environments focus on knowledge of the school in a community, how communities work and how principals can interact effectively with community partners, with a view to breaking through the ‘hundred year problems’ to which Elmore refers (2006).

Leadership development programs that support school improvement engage with the notion of data literacy within the school so that schools are able to ‘know themselves, do it for themselves and give their own account of their achievement (MacBeath, 1999, p.2). In this connection, Earl’s (2005, p.7)
distinction between what she describes as 'real' accountability and accounting is instructive. According to Earl, accounting is 'gathering, organising and reporting information that describes performance'. Accountability, however, is defined as 'the conversation about what information means and how it fits with everything we know and about how to use it to make positive changes'. Earl, in fact, goes further and suggests that accountability is intertwined with 'a moral and professional responsibility to be knowledgeable and fair in teaching [and learning] and in interactions with students and their parents'. Earl and Fullan (2003), however, suggest that school leaders lack confidence in understanding and using data. Others argue that student performance data tends to be for 'accounting' purposes rather than for improving teaching and learning (Shen & Cooley, 2008).

Our study suggests that tolerating a culture of acceptance is unlikely to make a difference to the performance and vitality of remote schools and the communities they serve. We argue that closer attention to processes devoted to the professional formation of school leaders will help to promote a culture of inquiry rather than one of acceptance for informing school improvement.

**References**


