

Transient Teachers: Mixed Messages of Schooling in Regional Australia

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This article explores the transience and mobility of teachers working in an isolated community: a secondary school in regional Australia. Drawing on parent, student, and teacher interviews, we ask: how should we understand these teacher commitments to schooling and how does this influence parents' and students' commitments and understandings of the 'outside' value of their community? Responses to these questions are theorized utilizing the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990). Drawing on this work we argue that, even though teachers in this context are the bearers of highly prized capitals, they act more as gatekeepers than as their distributors and/or challengers. While we conclude that teachers may need to address their mobility and the messages this conveys in order to make a difference in such schools and communities, we also acknowledge that there are complexities related to staff residing in the community given its treatment of 'outsiders'.

As Danaher, Moriarty, and Danaher (2003) point out in the introduction to this issue, Australians living in 'the bush' or 'the outback' have reputations "for being tough, resilient, innovative, and able to 'make do' with scarce and sometimes inadequate resources" (p. 131). In this article, however, we suggest that a disposition of 'making do' and 'toughing it out' is sometimes not enough to enable students to benefit from their schooling. The case study upon which our argument draws is in some ways a classic example of a community 'going without'. A second narrative in the article is of the teachers working in the community, many of whom regularly move out; regional communities often mean that 'making do' and 'toughing it out' can also be a difficult task for teachers (see also Jarzabkowski, 2003 and Moriarty & Gray, 2003).

Located in a small rural area of Australia and yet within commuting distance from a larger regional city, the secondary school upon which we focus is situated within an historic mining community. After a century of activity, the mine closed just over a decade ago. Reputed to have been the richest mine of its type in the world, its success extended far beyond the community, with its wealth stimulating the growth of nearby regional towns and the economy of the state in which it is located. Having provided work for tens of thousands over its lifetime, the economy of the town depended upon the continuance of mining. Since its closure, the community has experienced considerable economic depression and a high proportion of its residents are welfare dependent. In addition, because of its relatively

close proximity, most of the school's teachers live in the nearby regional city and commute to and from the school on a daily basis, interacting with the community as far as the boundaries of the school day dictate.

In exploring the effects on students and the community of these teachers' mobility, this article draws on 23 semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and students, although not all are directly quoted here. In particular, we explore how research participants read these teacher commitments to schooling and how this reading influences parents' and students' own commitments and their understandings of the 'outside' value of their community. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, we argue that schooling in this community is characterized by cultural capital with a low exchange value in broader fields, influenced to a large extent by the community's different economic and social capital. Even though teachers in this context are the bearers of more highly valued capitals, they act more as gatekeepers than as distributors and/or challengers of these arrangements. This is despite the efforts and best intentions of many of these highly committed teachers who genuinely seek to improve the academic and social outcomes for their students.

We conclude that, if teachers are to make a difference in such schools and communities, they will need to address their mobility and the messages this conveys. At the same time, however, we acknowledge that the issue of teacher transience is a lot more complex than the townspeople who criticize the nonresident teachers realize, with 'outsiders' in the community often subject to local hostility, vandalism, and abuse.

We begin this discussion by introducing the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his notion of capital, because of its explanatory power in elucidating the inequalities of opportunity in schooling. Such beginnings are important in

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helping us understand the complex relations between schooling and sociocultural contexts, and the potential these have for reproducing and/or transforming students' life futures.

Bourdieu and the Notion of Capital: The 'Perfect' Inequality of Opportunity

Pierre Bourdieu writes extensively about the central role that schools play in reproducing social and cultural inequalities. Once thought by some as capable of introducing a form of meritocracy by privileging individual aptitudes over hereditary privileges, the school system is viewed by Bourdieu (1998) as an institution for the reproduction of legitimate culture through the hidden linkages between scholastic aptitude and cultural heritage. Thus, despite ideologies of equal opportunity and meritocracy, few educational systems are called upon by the dominant classes "to do anything other than reproduce the legitimate culture as it stands and produce agents capable of manipulating it legitimately" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, pp. 59-60).

Bourdieu argues against this meritocratic illusion and has been involved in research to expose the fallacy of individuals possessing innate intelligence or 'giftedness' (see, for example, Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1974). In such work Bourdieu (1973, 1974) has argued that it is the culture of the dominant group, that is, the group that controls the economic, social, and political resources, which is embodied in schools. In short, educational institutions ensure the profitability of the cultural capital of the dominant, attesting to their gifts and merits. Educational differences are thus frequently 'misrecognized' as resulting from 'individual giftedness' rather than from class based differences, ignoring the fact that the abilities measured by scholastic criteria often stem not from natural 'gifts' but from "the greater or lesser affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 22).

Bourdieu uses the term 'cultural capital' to describe this familiarity with bourgeois culture, the unequal distribution of which helps to conserve social hierarchy under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy (Wacquant, 1998). It refers to a way of thinking and disposition to life where the "expected behaviours, expected language competencies, the explicit and implicit values, knowledge, attitudes to and relationship with academic culture required for success in school are all competencies which one class brings with them to school" (Henry, Knight, Lingard, & Taylor, 1988, p. 233). Yet "the school assumes middle-class culture, attitudes and values in *all* its pupils. Any other background, however rich in experiences, often turns out to be a liability" (Henry et al., 1988, pp. 142-143; emphasis added).

The injustices of "allowing certain people to succeed, based not upon merit but upon the cultural experiences, the

social ties and the economic resources they have access to, often remains unacknowledged in the broader society" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216). Hence, the implicit demands of the educational system "maintain the preexisting order, that is, the gap between pupils endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 20) 'behind the backs' of actors engaged in the school system—teachers, students, and their parents—and often against their will (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In brief, those involved in reproducing the social order often do so without either knowing they are doing so or wanting to do so (Bourdieu, 1998). And this is how we read much of the transience of the teachers we examine below. As implied above and expanded below, teachers frequently do not see and often do not intend the social sorting that schooling imparts on students.

Bourdieu's further insight is that cultural capital cannot be transmitted instantaneously; its accumulation requires an investment, above all of time. In other words, while cultural capital has the potential capacity to produce profits, it takes time to accumulate and is not readily available to everyone on the same basis. Hence, there is a clear imperative to "start early and to pursue its accumulation for as long as possible" (Gale & Densmore, 2000, p. 97). But, according to Bourdieu (1997), "the length of time for which a given individual can prolong his [sic passim] acquisition process depends on the length of time for which his family can provide him with the free time, i.e., time free from economic necessity" (pp. 49-50).

For marginalized groups such as those in our study, the cultural capital of their families, the way in which they see and experience the world, is not highly valued in schools, or at least the schooling system in general. Moreover, for many of these students, access to dominant forms of cultural capital is frequently limited to time at schools. We know that exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school. Paradoxically, those who are most in need of time in school to accumulate the dominant cultural capital—as they are less likely to acquire it from their homes and communities—are also those who are least likely to be free from the urgency of economic necessity. The reality is that time in school is a luxury and/or an irrelevance for many poor, ethnic minority students.

According to Grenfell and James (1998), Bourdieu's whole mission seems to be "to render visible these invisible operations as a way of making available the possibility at least of democratizing the product and processes of the field" (p. 22). Similarly, this article attempts to make visible the invisible effects of teacher transience and mobility in one regional Australian community, with a view to transforming the understandings and practices of those involved and thereby improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students.

“Close Their Books, Get in the Car, They’re Gone”

Moriarty, Danaher, and Danaher (2003) argue that “There are real challenges, as well as opportunities, associated with learning and teaching in Australian regional, rural, and remote locations” (p. 136). The teacher transience faced by the regional secondary school in our study is an example of one such challenge, where many of the staff choose to live in the nearby regional city and commute to and from the school on a daily basis rather than making the community their home. In doing so, their interactions with the community largely extend only as far as the boundaries of the school day. It is hardly surprising, then, that their commitment to the school appears to students and the community as temporary and fleeting. In brief, time on location is read as indicative of the extent of the teachers’ commitment to students’ learning and to students as individuals of value: in a word, shortlived.

As one parent explained, “There’s a lot of [teachers], you know, they come and go all the time” (Parent # 24), whereas she remembers her own schooling quite differently. Then,

You could honestly go to your teacher, even after class, and say, “Look, I can’t understand,” and they’d sit down and say, “Let’s see where we’re going wrong.” . . . Five minutes of their time didn’t mean a damn thing. . . . But [now] it’s close their books, get in the car, they’re gone. They don’t really care till the next morning. (Parent # 24)

Of course, there are other possible reasons for the reduced availability of teachers’ time for students, the intensification of work in globalized economies being one such explanation. On another level, this teacher transience also forms part of the “reproductive struggle . . . in which [dominated classes] are beaten before they start” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 168). It is a domination that tends to operate in two ways. Firstly, given that it is the culture of the dominant group which is embodied in the education system (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974) and which determines “the criteria which define success within it” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 22), the reality is that “only certain kinds of readings and knowledge are prized, rewarded or even recognized” (Gale & Densmore, 2000, p. 96) in schools.

Secondly, while cultural capital takes time to accumulate, it is not readily available to everyone on the same basis. We know that exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school; it is the knowledge of and familiarity with bourgeois culture that are rewarded and recognized. However, for students from marginalized groups, whose families’ cultural capital—their dispositions, competencies, attitudes, and values—is not highly valued in schools, access to its

dominant forms is frequently limited to time at schools. So while the staff of this regional community school are the bearers of highly prized capitals with their knowledges, skills, and modes of expression constituting the heritage of the cultivated classes, for some students their only exposure to this cultural competence is in the form of interactions with these very teachers. Hence, by limiting their interactions with the community to the school day, these teachers are also limiting possibilities for their students and members of the community more generally to acquire the cultural capital of the dominant. In doing so, they act more as gatekeepers than as distributors of capitals with the potential to transform their students’ life futures.

This is not to say that the value of the cultural capital of the school’s staff is inherently recognized and endorsed by students and community members. Disenfranchized from the larger society and with the inherited linguistic and cultural competencies of their homes and communities significantly undervalued, some respond by rejecting the legitimacy of schools, dismissing them as institutions of dominant groups (Brint, 1998). Excluded rather than respected for their difference, many students, for example, respond by developing an identity of themselves as outcasts and displaying a pattern of low commitment to schooling. The cultural mismatch experienced by minority students can impact on their motivation, beliefs, and values, affecting their will to learn and impacting adversely on their interest, persistence, and attention to activities promoted by schooling (Boykin, 1986).

The research of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) on African-American students and peer group influence found that the perception of schooling as a subtractive process—that is, as “one-way acculturation into the cultural frame of reference of the dominant group members of their society” (p. 201)—even caused some students to resist and oppose achieving success in their academic pursuits. These students viewed success as ‘white people’s prerogative’ and striving for success in school as ‘acting white’ at the expense of their own cultural and identity integrity. The resulting social pressures against striving for academic success can mean that some students who are academically able perform well below their potential. In effect, many of these students are choosing, either consciously or unconsciously, to maintain their view of their own identity in what they perceive as a choice between allegiance to ‘them’ or ‘us’ (Delpit, 1992). Clearly, students are actively involved in determining their own futures, and can choose to cooperate with or resist teachers and the school system (Knight, 1994).

“You’ve Got to Be a Part of the Town”

Transience is also an issue for those few teachers who choose to live in the town for the duration of their employment at the school. Students and the school community are all too familiar with teachers’ ‘comings’ and ‘goings’ and

with the implicit as well as explicit promises that their temporary residency suggests. One of the parents, for example, told us that she doesn't "feel that [the principal has] lived up to expectation" (Parent # 19). She went on to say:

To start with she told me that she wanted to make [this town] her home, that this was going to be the school that she retired from. . . . Now she's talking about perhaps applying for a transfer so I just wonder did she [tell me] the things that I wanted to hear? (Parent # 19)

More generally, this parent believed that the perception in the town was that the principal:

isn't the person that they wanted. . . . She doesn't want to get involved with the town and yet that was what she said in the first place: She wanted to live in the town and be part of it. And there were functions that we have now and then, we ask her would she like to welcome [the people] and she says, "Oh no, that's [Parents' and Citizens' Association] business. It's got nothing to do with me." So she's basically putting a barrier up and you can't do that in a town like this. You've got to be a part of the town and that is what I thought we were getting. (Parent # 19)

Indicated here is a particular conception of the relations between school and community: a desire for staff who want to get involved with the town and make the town their home. There is also recognition that, despite the richness and diversity of the cultural capital of the marginalized in this regional community, its value is considerably reduced in comparison to access to middle class culture, attitudes, and values for ensuring success in educational institutions. Implicitly, this parent realizes that it is the values, experiences, and perspectives of privileged groups that parade as universal in schools, while the voices and experiences of marginalized groups tend to be excluded and their inherited linguistic and cultural competencies (cultural capital) devalued (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). More explicitly:

[W]hat meanings are considered the most important, what experiences are deemed the most legitimate, and what forms of writing and reading matter are largely determined by those groups who control the economic and cultural apparatuses of a given society. (Giroux, 1990, p. 85)

However, this is not to say that teachers cannot act as agents of transformation rather than reproduction. That is, depending on the curriculum and pedagogy on offer, schools and teachers can either:

[S]ilence students by denying their voice, that is, by refusing to allow them to speak from their own histories, experiences, and social positions, or [they] can enable them to speak by being attentive to how different voices can be constituted within specific pedagogical relations so as to engage their histories and experiences in both an affirmative and critical way. (Giroux, 1990, p. 91)

Nevertheless, to several members of the community in this study the teacher transience in this regional school communicates a low outside valuing of the community, and is a good example of what some in the community would perceive as educational experiences in less than satisfactory circumstances. It exemplifies regional schools having to 'make do' because the necessary resources taken for granted in major cities—in this case, ready access to those with the cultural capital of the dominant—are in short supply.

"I Cannot Live Here"

However, while the community desires staff who want to make the town their home, there are a number of reasons why many teachers choose to commute to the school rather than live in the community, including the poor standard and lack of subsidized departmental housing, and harassment from the community. As the principal noted:

[The Education Department] can't offer [staff] decent housing [in this community]. I was in a house that up until a month ago was probably below anything any principal in this state would live in. . . . It's a very poor standard house. We pay the same rate per week as someone living in a Departmental house in any other city or town in [the state]. Other places have security and air conditioning and . . . we have none of that and . . . I've been broken into, I have been assaulted in my house through not having secure facilities. . . . I can't even have my piano in my house because the roof leaks so badly. . . . So I can't say to staff, "There's good houses." In addition to that there are only four [Departmental] houses in town so that doesn't house all my staff anyway. (Principal)

As for others on staff, "if you were a young staff member you wouldn't want to live in town either" (Principal), because:

[Y]ou are subjected to abuse. . . . I've got one staff member who's had their tires slashed three times in the past two years [while the car has been] housed in their garage. . . . He has had windows broken, he has been assaulted, he has had his roof rocked

constantly, he's exposed to verbal harassment constantly. . . . And I've got a married staff member living in [Departmental] quarters that [has] had to cut down every ounce of greenery in the yard because ex-students were hiding and they were concerned about break and enter. . . . So that's the atmosphere you live in. . . . So I can't encourage families to live in my town. I can't encourage young females particularly to live in town. (Principal)

However, the principal did tell us that her:

position [in the community] has improved very much. . . . When I first moved in I was treated like everybody else [who is new to the community]. I'm treated very well by the community now and don't get any sort of harassment now but it's taken me two and a half years. (Principal)

Of course, it might not be a matter of being singled out for such treatment because one is a teacher. Rather, it could be a reaction to:

anyone that's new to the community. In fact we're having difficulty attracting and maintaining outside students because they come to the school and they complain of harassment because they're not from the community or are different. In fact two that left, their parents bought a house in the community because it was low cost and they were looking at living here and the mother said to me, "I wish I would have known what the community was like before I moved in. I cannot live here." And the children are now going to [city] schools. Now not all of the community is like that but unfortunately there's enough of those type of people to make it difficult for the people who want to move here. (Principal)

In the context of an isolated community within an economically depressed area with high welfare dependency, transience—both of professionals (such as teachers) and of community members, perhaps in search of employment—is a real issue. Perhaps the response of some of the community who "make it difficult for the people who want to move here" could be interpreted as their reaction to the shortlived, 'here today and gone tomorrow' commitment they encounter in many newcomers to their community. Interpreting teacher commitments to schooling in this regional area and understanding the low 'outside' valuing of their community, it is possible that these acts of harassment and abuse toward newcomers to the community are related to the experienced injustices of the lack of success of many in the community, which they recognize as being based not upon merit but upon

"the cultural experiences, the social ties and the economic resources they have access to" (Wacquant, 1998, p. 216).

"It's a Town That Can Suck You Dry"

Some teachers also told us about how the town can "suck you dry" (see also the student teacher quoted at the beginning of Jarzabkowski, 2003). For example, the principal, who chose to live in this community when she accepted her position, said:

In hindsight because I wasn't living full time in the town I probably didn't realize . . . how the town can suck you into the vacuum. . . . And many of the agencies that come in say it's a town that can suck you dry. And I think now in my two years and nine months it's starting to do that to me. . . . I think that the caring, compassionate and I might even use the word do-gooder gets sucked dry and I feel that everything I do, whether it's a staff meeting, community meeting, I come out needing a blood transfusion. (Principal)

She went on to say:

If I was less compassionate I wouldn't get sucked into feeling that I need to support everybody. But the other side, the compassion[ate] side of me, says I can't let people down. . . . I'm probably far too empathetic. It's what probably the school needs is [a] compassion[ate] and empathetic person who lives in the town who responds to situations because they know exactly what's happened rather than someone who turns up at eight o'clock and leaves at four and wants to help and is very hardworking and very enthusiastic and wants to do a good job but doesn't know the atmosphere and doesn't know the things that have happened so can't respond appropriately. So there's two sides to that and I mean personally I'm actually looking Saturday at a house in [the nearby city] because my strategy for perhaps dealing with what's happening is to say perhaps I need to live in [the city] so that I can escape. (Principal)

So while there are positive aspects to living in the community, such as:

at night and on weekends when students are in difficulty or when things happen. . . . I can be there for people. . . . The negative [side] is that my life then is no life and . . . I think what has happened is the community think that it's my job now to be there 24 hours a day. And quite often I'll have

phone calls that say, “I’ve been trying to ring you till 11 o’clock and you didn’t answer your phone” . . . [or] “I really needed you and I tried to ring and you weren’t there.” (Principal)

Perhaps this feeling of being “sucked dry” and “needing a blood transfusion” could be related to feeling like the sole source of cultural capital. As exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school, it is possible that the community members’ high reliance on the principal is a reflection of their reliance on her access to this capital. When the principal—who is an important source of the dominant cultural capital—resides in the community, access for the marginalized to this capital is potentially increased to time outside school and also to those who are not at school. It is possible that, because the principal recognizes the importance of her role as a key source of the dominant cultural capital in the community, she understands that “looking at accommodation in [the nearby city] would probably be viewed in a poor light by some in the community” (Principal).

“Living in Town . . . Makes Me Feel More Valued or Appreciated”

However, these views of the principal were not universally shared by staff. The few staff members who chose to live in the community, rather than travel to and from the school on a daily basis, told us how their local residency seems to have helped their relationship with the students and the broader community, and they feel more valued and appreciated as a result.

For example, one teacher told us, “I think living in town helps a lot because I get to see [the students on] Saturday mornings up town . . . and I know where they live and . . . they all know where I live and I think that’s a big thing” (Teacher # 20). Indeed, his view was that the students and the broader community:

have a bigger picture of me. Some of them will see me in my back yard garden and some will see me playing with my kids. . . . Some will see me driving around town or talking to other people. . . . One year I ended up being the main speaker at Anzac Day [commemorating Australians who have died or been injured in wars]. . . . They’ll see me doing those sorts of things whereas some of the teachers who live in [the city] won’t spend nearly as much time up here. For their own reasons which is fine . . . but they just see me in a different light. (Teacher # 20)

He also found that:

[A] whole range of people in the community will say hello to me . . . [and] they’re from all levels, from even say the Mayor down, you know, will stop and talk and I get to know them. I had a phone call last night, the lady in charge of the show society asking me to judge something. . . . I said, “Okay, yeah, I’ll do it.” But I . . . took it as a compliment and those sorts of things I quite enjoy, you know. I guess it makes me feel a little bit more valued or appreciated or something or other or just accepted into the community. (Teacher # 20)

Bourdieu would argue that it is the profitability of the cultural capital of the dominant, and this teacher’s access to such cultural capital, that make him “a little bit more valued or appreciated . . . or . . . accepted into the community.” That is, his knowledge, skills, and modes of expression constitute the heritage of cultivated classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979); he is an example of the middle class culture, attitudes, and values the school assumes in all its pupils (Henry et al., 1988). That he has been “the main speaker at Anzac Day” and has been asked to be a judge for the local show also attest to the fact that some members of the community consider him to be a bearer of highly prized capitals.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that teacher transience is an important issue for teachers and students in regional communities ‘doing it tough’. This is not simply a matter of teachers’ selective presence in these communities: there during the school day but gone the moment it ends and there for a year or two and gone again. It is also a matter of the scarcity of what teachers have to offer—the cultural capital of the dominant, often in short supply in marginalized regional communities—and the logic of its transmission bound up in extended periods of time in its company. These are important issues when we consider that:

[W]e do not enter fields with equal amounts, or identical configurations, of capital. Some have inherited wealth, cultural distinctions from upbringing and family connections. Some individuals, therefore, already possess quantities of relevant capital . . . which makes them better players than others in certain field games. Conversely, some are disadvantaged. (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 21)

For marginalized students in the regional school in this study, then, teacher transience poses a real threat to their access to the cultural capital of the dominant. While some are born into hereditary privileges and cultural heritage that lead to scholastic aptitude, many others suffer educational

repercussions for having a cultural capital that is in the wrong currency (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

Although exposure to the cultural capital of dominant groups is necessary for success at school, teacher commitments to schooling in this regional area mean that those who are most in need of time in the company of the bearers of highly prized capitals are unlikely to have such experiences. That is unless more teachers take seriously their role as privileged and act as distributors of the dominant cultural capital. We would suggest that, for teachers to make a difference in such schools and communities, they will need to address their transience and the messages this conveys. At the same time, however, we acknowledge the complexities surrounding issues of teacher mobility, given the harassment, hostility, and abuse reported by newcomers to the community. The contradictions in this account are indeed perplexing: the very thing the community would seem to want and need, it works in ways to turn away. What is important to understand, however, is that, while the extent to which teachers have a physical presence in these communities is important, the nature of that presence is possibly more important and it is this that teachers need to 'pin down'. The issue is students' access to the cultural capital of the dominant and what teachers can do to assist in this accumulation process, bearing in mind that "external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus, cannot be transmitted instantaneously" (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 48).

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