

## **Dry Stone Walls, Black Stumps and the Mobilisation of Professional Learning: Rural Places and Spaces and Teachers' Self-Study Strategies in Ireland and Australia**

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**Abstract** In very different ways, dry stone walls and black stumps evoke sets of images and meanings ascribed to living in the rural areas of Ireland and Australia respectively. For the purposes of this chapter, they highlight as well the challenges and opportunities in professional learning encountered by teachers working in rural educational settings. To be successful, these teachers need to engage in effective self-study calibrated to the distinctive contexts of their work. Yet we argue that self-study must also take account of the politicised character of the places and spaces of current rural life. Throughout, our purpose is to examine how this then speaks back to a teacher education constituency against the backdrop of wider socioeconomic developments helping to frame the work of teachers and teacher educators in both countries.

Deploying a comparative, exploratory case study research design, the chapter analyzes selected critical self-reflections of teachers in rural educational settings in Ireland and Australia. Data are generated through the three authors' collaborative autoethnographic accounts of their own respective rural teaching experiences. The analysis is framed by the French theorist Michel de Certeau's enduringly significant distinction between places and spaces. The key finding is both the need for, and the potential diversity of, rural teachers' successful self-study strategies if their professional learning is to be sustainable and possibly transformative for themselves, their students and their communities.

### **Introduction**

Dry stone walls and black stumps are among the images used to evoke quintessentially rural landscapes. A representative text (Garner 2005, p. 6) enjoined its readers familiar with England: "Think of the Cotswolds without their golden stone or the Peak District of Derbyshire without its white limestone walls". Certainly dry stone walls figure prominently in scholarly accounts of Ireland, including its habitats and biodiversity (Hickey 2013), its early mediaeval settlement enclosures (O'Sullivan & Nicholl 2011) and its cinematic history (Condon 2008). Likewise, "beyond the black stump" is well-known in Australian parlance as denoting geographically remote territory – sometimes called "the outback" (Mayne 2008), literally

contrasting such territory (implicitly unfavourably) with the settled and developed areas of “the in front” – and as helping to constitute part of the diversity of national imaginings.

Teaching is one occupation whose complex interactions with working in rural settings has been researched extensively. This scholarship ranges from professional development for Australian rural mathematics and science teachers (Tytler, Symington, Darby, Malcolm, & Kirkwood 2011) to Canadian beginning rural teachers’ self-reported experiences (Hellsten, McIntyre, & Prytula 2011), to teachers’ selection of teaching strategies in rural China (Wang 2011), to a perception of lower levels of school climate by Malaysian rural teachers (Othman & Muijs 2013), a heightened sense of workplace wellbeing among Norwegian rural teachers (Burns & Machin 2013), rural teachers’ specialised training needs in Sub-Saharan Africa (Buckler 2011), as well as rural elementary school teachers’ technology integration practices in the United States (Howley, Wood, & Hough 2011). Despite the wide geographical spread of this research, the distinctive affordances and challenges of teaching in rural environments are a recurring theme.

The authors of this chapter seek to contribute to this scholarship by presenting a comparative autoethnographic account of their experiences of working as teachers in rural areas in Ireland and Australia – next to “the dry stone walls” and “beyond the black stump” respectively. In doing so, the authors explore multiple approaches to the notion of self-study, the process of critical reflection contributing to ongoing professional learning that teachers, regardless of location, must mobilize if they are to survive, let alone thrive, in their chosen careers.

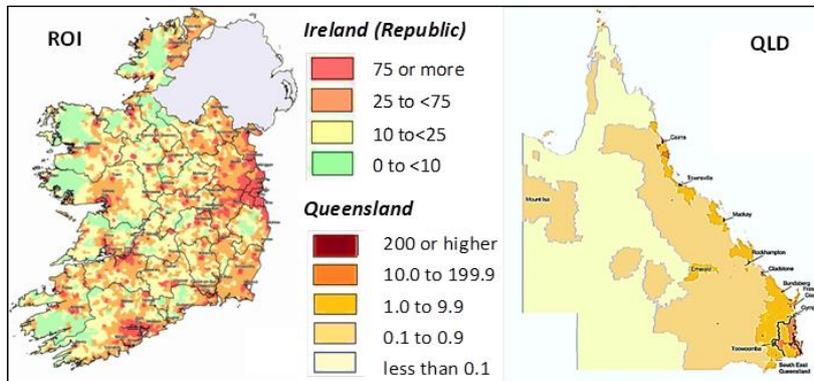
By way of the contrastive contexts informing this account, the population profiles of the Republic of Ireland<sup>1</sup> and the State of Queensland (as being illustrative rather than representative of Australia) are portrayed in Figure 1:

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**Figure 1: Population profiles for the Republic of Ireland and the State of Queensland in 2011** (Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2011; Queensland Treasury and Trade, 2012)

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<sup>1</sup> “Ireland” can denote the physical island, the Ireland/Éire of Romantic Celtic imagination and the nationalist vision of an independent, 32-county republic. Currently in this State, “Ireland”/“Irish State”/“Republic of Ireland” (ROI) are used to denote the 26-county republic. It is not possible to include discussion of Northern Ireland in this chapter.



	Republic of Ireland (ROI)	Queensland (QLD)	Ratio ROI:QLD
Population	4,581,269	4,599,360	1:1
Area	70,273 km <sup>2</sup>	1,852,642 km <sup>2</sup>	1:26
Persons per km <sup>2</sup> (Overall geographical location)	67.0	2.6	26:1
Persons per km <sup>2</sup> (Rural)	26.0	<1.0	at least 26:1

Clearly, although both rurality and remoteness are difficult to define, the catch-all term “rural and remote” has profoundly different resonances in these two contexts. Despite having a 1:1 overall population ratio in 2011, Ireland and Queensland have very different land areas and population densities within those areas. These differences in turn, frame and generate very different kinds of experiences of the phenomena pertaining to “rural and remote”, including in relation to teaching and learning.

The chapter has been divided into the following six sections:

- Literature review
- Conceptual framework
- Research design
- Authors’ autoethnographic accounts of teaching in rural areas
- Analysis of those accounts vis-à-vis teachers’ self-study practices in culturally constituted educational places and spaces
- Suggested concluding implications of that analysis

The overall purpose of the chapter is therefore threefold: to present a carefully circumscribed but hopefully engaging and evocative comparison between rural teachers' experiences in Ireland and Australia; to extend this book's coverage of self-study approaches by elaborating the synergies between self-study and collaborative autoethnography; and to link the chapter's concepts of places and spaces with self-study strategies for rural educators as well as with broader socioeconomic trends and policy debates in both countries. We see this threefold purpose as articulating with, yet also helping to move beyond, existing scholarship in this field.

### **Literature Review**

A major focus of the rural education literature has been on investigating the work and identities of rural educators. In the United States, this scholarship has included the distinctive transition practices used by rural teachers with their preschool students (Murphy, McCormick, & Rous 2013), the complexities of teaching science, technology, engineering and mathematics in rural areas (Goodpaster, Adedokun, & Weaver 2012), the teachers of gifted rural students (Price Azano, Callahan, Missett, & Brunner 2014), a phenomenological study of rural teachers' experiences of recruitment and retention (Taylor 2012), and the impact on such retention of rural teachers developing a strong sense of community membership (Mahan 2010). In Australia, this literature has highlighted the locational specificities attending rural teachers' engagements with notions of social justice (Cuervo 2012), the value of collaborative professional learning opportunities to offset the absence of a critical mass of specialist rural teachers such as those teaching the visual arts (Mathewson Mitchell 2013), a posited reciprocal relationship between teacher education and the sustainability of rural communities (White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, Reid, & Green 2011) and an asserted structural misalignment between contractual employment and beginning rural teachers' likelihood of remaining in the profession (Plunkett & Dyson 2011).

Selected topics in this literature have encompassed the distinctive professional development needs of rural teachers (Berry Bertram 2010), rural teachers' efficacy to enhance their students' motivation levels (Hardré & Hennessey 2013), the diverse attitudes to educational inclusion articulated by rural teachers (Morris 2013), rural teachers' perceptions of social class (Pini, Price, & McDonald 2010; Smyth, Mooney, & Casey 2014), opportunities for community support to augment rural pre-service teachers' practicum experiences (Kline, White, & Lock 2013), resilience strategies demonstrated by successful beginning rural teachers (Castro, Kelly, & Shih 2010) and equivalent resilience strategies enacted by special educators in rural schools

(Zost 2010). The diversity evident in this topic has been accompanied by a similar variability of research paradigms and methods, and of conceptual frameworks.

A significant strand in the scholarship about rural teachers is the intersection between the reported expectations and experiences of individual teachers in particular rural education settings on the one hand and broader issues of sociocultural theory on the other. Examples of this intersection include rural teachers' mobility contributing potentially to rural students' marginalization (Mills & Gale 2003), the gendered framing of a female novice rural teaching principal (Clarke & Stevens 2006), understanding rural teachers' work against the backdrop of sociocultural analysis and literacy theory (Corbett 2010) and applying the notion of place-based teacher education to pre-service placements in rural communities (Ajayi 2014).

A different but parallel theme in the literature is the interplay between self-study and teachers' professional learning (see also Arnold 2011). The cornerstone of this interplay is teachers using the resources and techniques of critical self-reflection to generate, renew and sustain their capacity-building and development as professionals – or, as synthesized by Samaras and Roberts (2011, p. 42), “In self-study teachers critically examine their actions and the context of those actions as a way of developing a more consciously driven mode of professional activity, as contrasted with action based on habit, tradition, or impulse”. (Kubler LaBoskey (2004, p. 817) encapsulated the key characteristics of educators' self-study thus: “...it is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement-aimed; it is interactive; it includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods; and...it defines validity as a validation process based in trustworthiness...” A more extended overview was provided by Loughran (2007):

Although the term self-study suggests a singular approach to researching practice, the reality is that self-studies are dramatically strengthened by drawing on alternative perspectives and reframing of situations, [and] thus data, ideas, and input that necessitate moving beyond the self. Moving beyond the self also matters because a central purpose in self-study is uncovering deeper understandings of the relationship between teaching and teaching and learning about teaching. (p. 12).

One example of this approach is the use of pre-service teachers' personal memories of seminal childhood texts called “touchstones” (Strong-Wilson et al. 2014, p. 394) that influenced their decisions to become teachers as reflective devices to distil broader lessons about contemporary educational provision and social justice issues. A different strategy is to focus on the parallel learning activities and outcomes of teachers and their students or, more specifically from the perspective of this chapter and this book, on how teachers' self-study can be enhanced by their understandings of how their students learn (Vermunt 2014). Yet another

technique is to employ autobiographical vignettes to maximize teachers' self-knowledge, which "...is vital for teachers because it paves the way for shaping and continuing to shape what teachers know about themselves as learners and what they might learn about teaching" (Ambler 2012, p. 181). Similar approaches have also been deployed to create and sustain self-study communities of practice among beginning teacher educators to "...provid[e] a model of professional development that is self-directed, collaborative, and empowering" (Gallagher, et al. 2011, p. 880). When the elements are applied wholeheartedly and the contextual factors are propitious, self-study can indeed be transformative for educators and their students alike (Lyons, Halton, & Freidus 2013).

A particular strand of the contemporary scholarship relates to self-study vis-à-vis educators working in regional, rural and remote locations. For instance, self-study was found to be effective in contributing to a successful partnership model of professional learning for teachers in rural schools in Tasmania, Australia (Stack et al. 2011). Likewise, academics at an Australian regional university enacted the principles of self-study to enhance their effectiveness as online educators teaching early childhood teacher education courses (Green et al. 2013; Wolodko et al. 2013). In a very different environment, educators at the Zimbabwe Open University have designed their courses in ways that promote their students' self-study capabilities that resonate with the students' respective contexts, including rural and remote locations (Mafa, Mpfu, & Chimhenga 2013). Further north in the African continent, self-study has similarly informed the design and development of a long-running program of pre- and in-service teacher education, encompassing teachers working in rural areas, in the sub-Saharan countries of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (Hardman et al. 2011). Self-study has also been posited as one of a raft of strategies designed to regenerate rural teacher education in China (Zhu 2013). More broadly, Tatto (1997) asserted – and assembled empirical cases to endorse that assertion – that "teachers working in the periphery" (p. 139), including those "...located in rural or remote areas of a country" (p. 141), can use selected techniques of self-study to maximise their resilience and to heighten their impact.

This necessarily selective review of current literature pertaining to rural teachers and teaching has highlighted the locational contexts of these teachers' work as exercising a significant influence on their occupational strategies and their professional identities alike. In some ways, those contexts are positioned as constraining, deficit and marginalizing; in other ways, they are constructed as sites of innovation, sustainability and transformation. Against this fluid and politically nuanced backdrop, self-study has emerged as a consistently flexible,

successful and useful device for educators' and in some cases for their students' continuing learning.

### Conceptual Framework

Rurality emerges from the preceding literature review as a contested notion that is manifested in significantly different ways from country to country, and certainly between Ireland and Australia as outlined in this chapter. Given that contestation and that variation, it is crucial to mobilize a conceptual framework that affords appropriate explanatory power in analyzing examples of teachers' self-study and accompanying professional learning from across these multiple contexts. The concepts deployed in this chapter to facilitate this kind of analysis are the paired categories of places and spaces.

Several social theorists have developed theorizations of the relationships between places and spaces (see for example Bourdieu 1985; Castells 2005; Giddens 1987; Soja 1989), and these have been deployed to very good effect in interpreting contemporary educational debates and issues. The particular approach to conceptualizing places and spaces applied in this chapter is that of the French theorist Michel de Certeau (1984; Ahearne 1995; Buchanan 1996; Danaher 2001, 2010). For de Certeau, the distinction between places and spaces was less a theoretical binary than an ongoing and unceasing interdependence and interplay, one with politicised overtones and empirical manifestations:

*A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualisation, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. In contradistinction to the place, it has none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper'. (p. 117; *emphasis in original*)*

de Certeau (1984) distilled his differentiation between places and spaces by asserting, "In short, *space is a practised place*" (p. 117; *emphasis in original*). He sought to signify by this proposition that places are strategic sites of official and unofficial power, and moreover that formally designated, sanctioned and valued places are entered, changed and sometimes transformed into spaces through the tactical consumption of those places. He cited as illustrations of this contention readers turning the texts constructed by authors into different

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spaces from what the authors had envisaged and likewise walkers turning streets into varied spaces from those imagined by the urban planners who had designed them. From this perspective, despite places being sites of power, the changing of those places into spaces carried with it the potential to contest, to disrupt and even to transform that power.

de Certeau's (1984) distinction between places and spaces has been criticised as a fixed binary and hence as an unhelpful theoretical contribution (Danaher 2001). By contrast, the authors of this chapter endorse the distinction as denoting instead the complex and contextualized intersection between two concepts that are themselves mobile and shifting – veritable floating signifiers (Danaher & Danaher 2000). As we elaborate below, we see a similarly multifaceted relationship between urbanism and rurality – while the differentiation is politically valenced, meanings ebb and flow between the two interdependent and mutually constitutive terms.

The chapter's conceptual framework, centred on de Certeau's (1984) depiction of places and spaces, thereby constitutes a means of analyzing the following autoethnographic accounts of teaching in rural Ireland and Australia as incidents of self-study geared to enhancing educators' professional learning. The presentation of those accounts is preceded by an overview of the study's research design.

### **Research Design**

This chapter draws on the methodological features and strengths of a comparative, exploratory case study. These features exemplify and exploit the case study's undoubted flexibility and robustness as a research method (Thomas 2011). They also derive from the emergent yet focused character of the study's research question: "What do the authors' autoethnographic accounts of teaching in places and spaces in rural Ireland and Australia demonstrate about broader issues of self-study and teachers' professional learning?" These broader issues relate particularly to the politicized contexts in which such self-study and professional learning are designed and enacted and that help to inform the criteria used for evaluating the effectiveness or otherwise of strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of educators' professional practice. Methodologically, we write ourselves into these accounts of teaching and teacher education (Denzin 2014; Rowan 2001).

Given that interrogatory purpose, as Bleijenbergh (2010, p. 61) noted that, "With an exploratory research question, researchers select cases that maximize the opportunities for developing hypotheses or theories that explain the social phenomenon at stake", and furthermore that, "Since this is an inductive research design, screening of the cases has to be

based on empirical considerations” (p. 61). In this situation, the “empirical considerations” included the authors’ ongoing professional collaborations and their shared and separate experiences of teaching in rural locations in their respective countries. Accordingly the cases represent the three authors’ particular reflections on those experiences. The comparative element is clearly partly between Ireland and Australia and also among the authors’ reflections on their teaching experiences – for example, the two Australian authors’ sets of experiences occurred in different places and at different times from each other.

Autoethnography is rapidly gaining prominence as a similarly robust research method in educational research (see for example Boylorn & Orbe 2014; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis 2013; Sparkes 2013; Speedy 2013). As Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) observed:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. (p. 273)

These two features – the systematic analysis of personal experience and the overtly politicized dimension of that analysis – exhibit close alignment respectively with the strategies of self-study and de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between places and spaces elaborated earlier in the chapter.

Moreover, the authors’ enactment of joint self-study presented in this chapter accords with the principles and practices of collaborative autoethnography articulated by Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013). In particular, we have been attentive to “...how the method preserves the unique strengths of self-reflexivity associated with autobiography, cultural interpretation associated with ethnography, and multi-subjectivity associated with collaboration” (p. 17), and also to the need “...to be self-focused, researcher-visible, context-conscious, and critically dialogic” (p. 22). At the same time, we acknowledge the potential limitations of autoethnography conceded by Chang et al., including “...the danger of self-perpetuating perspectives,” (p. 21) and the risk that “...a study of one’s self lacks the possibility of demonstrating researcher accountability during the research process because the researcher is also the participant” (p. 21). Significantly, as Change et al. noted also, both of these concerns are ameliorated by promoting the collaborative dimension of this autoethnography.

Furthermore, while the distinction between autoethnography and self-study is not clear-cut, we do not see them as precisely synonymous. For us, Arnold (2011) encapsulated neatly a subtle but significance differentiation between the terms:

The self-narrative in auto-ethnography involves more than storytelling: it leads to and involves the analysis of such storying telling and enquiry into self as data rather than mere presentation of one's story. Auto-ethnography as a methodology utilised and valued in the academy takes self-narrative from the arena of storytelling into that of the production of data leading to new knowledge and/or new understanding of areas of known knowledge. (p. 70)

In other words, while self-study is well-established as one among several effective approaches to teacher's professional learning, autoethnography can be seen as a similarly well-established research method that can be deployed to link individual educators' self-studies with broader research agenda and with the generation and analysis of data to address wider research questions.

Because the study drew directly only on the authors' critical self-reflections shared with one another, there was no requirement for formal institutional human ethics approval. Nevertheless, we adhered fully to the spirit of such approval – for instance, by respecting the tenets of confidentiality and by encouraging and supporting one another in the process of articulating and sharing reminiscences of our respective rural teaching experiences. In doing so, we have sought to follow Tolich's (2010) recommendations for "...taking autoethnographers beyond procedural ethics and providing tools for their ethics in practice" (p. 1599).

Finally in this section of the chapter, the approach to data analysis pursued in this comparative, exploratory case study and this collaborative autoethnography was inductive, iterative and qualitative in character. The authors' individual self-reflections were generated in response to the study's research question and conceptual framework and were informed by prior conversations among the authors to assist in evoking memories and in aligning them with the goals of the study. These data were then shared, clarified and affirmed within the authorial team. Analysis took the form of separate and then combined identification, confirmation and where appropriate refinement of the emerging themes. Writing the autoethnographic accounts presented in the next section also constituted a crucial part of the developing analysis.

### **Autoethnographic Accounts**

Three autoethnographic reflections are now offered. While the second and the third authors have both taught in regional and rural Queensland, Australia, their experiences were by no means identical, but rather reflected different contexts and divergent frames of reference.

## MÁIRÍN

Ireland's dry stone walls are emblematic of a rural way of life, and a national mythology. On both counts, the image never reflected the whole story: there are many sides to this geography, at socioeconomic, cultural and educational levels, and the national mythology powerfully blurred recognition of these. Here I reflect on the construction(s) of rurality in national discourse as reflected in the school experiences of myself and my colleagues, and then on some of the implications for teachers and their self-study.

### Why teach in the country?

Having trained in Dublin, I found a teaching post there because I liked the city buzz and the freedom of anonymity. A few years on, I considered a post in a rural school but chose to stay in the city. My motives were social and personal, balancing relationships I had formed against the idea of becoming part of an organic community. I was not choosing to be specifically or exclusively an urban or a rural teacher.

Several members of my family are teachers; all initially taught in the city, but now live and teach in rural areas. I asked them about this move. Again their reasons reflected personal, social, cultural and lifestyle priorities, not specificities of their teacher identities. One observed that most teachers she knew went back to their counties of origin, to be near their families, to marry locals, start a family, and live in the countryside. And, in 21st century motorized Ireland, local towns, cities, even Dublin, are easily accessible; and local teachers' socialising can criss-cross between family and old friends. Teachers who live within reach of town and country may prefer the stimulus of a large school, or the intimacy of a small one. Teachers are also aware that behavioural issues can pose more difficulty in urban schools but, though some will change schools to escape the problem, very few will move home to do so. So professional interests play a part, but rarely determine teachers' choices.

My perceptions of remoteness were expanded when I took a post teaching Travellers (see also Kenny 1997). Travellers are a historically nomadic indigenous ethnic minority in Ireland; they comprise less than one per cent of the national population. They were commercial nomads, trading in goods and services with the dominant settled majority. There is a mosaic of such populations stretching across Europe, officially termed "Roma and other Travellers" and the most harshly discriminated and socioeconomically disadvantaged minority populations in Europe. Mac Gréil (1996, p. 341) described the prevailing position of Travellers in Irish society as one of "caste-like apartheid".

That choice rendered me more isolated, professionally and socially, than if I had moved to a one-teacher school on the moon. Teaching Travellers brought me and many of my teaching colleagues to question the whole purpose and design of the practice of teaching. We asked: whom are we teaching; what and how should we teach them; what do they want to learn; and how do they do it? And why are they in separate school provision? Some of us teachers of Travellers adopted a wider, sociological framework, and asked: who are these people; why are they stigmatized in Irish society; where are they going; and how does our practice intersect with all that? Thus, this professionally remote teaching sector played a significant role in driving inclusive, intercultural, antiracist education in Ireland.

We teachers of Travellers were pushed by the severity of their marginalization to question our professional identities and practice – a questioning that was deepened by our discovery that we were ignorant of Irish Travellers’ identity in the first place. How could we know how to teach Travellers, if we did not know who they were? More broadly, rurality may enter into teachers’ identity as a value-related concept later in their careers, but I suggest that the lower level of challenge within rural classrooms means that teachers may not be pushed to think about the specificities of rural identity and their implications for teaching.

#### Myths and their interruption(s)

The Irish identity promoted in teacher education colleges reflected the national myth – it was explicitly denominational, Romantic-Ireland rural and silently middle class. An incident from my own schooldays (in the 1950s) serves to highlight some of the blank spaces in this national rurality myth. It happened during the crowning event of our last year in primary school: the trip to Dublin. There we walked hand-in-hand along the teeming pavements, boys and girls in separate chains, teachers fore and aft. We fell silent, shy of the gaze of so many strangers. And then a bunch of city kids ran at us, jeering the hand-holding culchies<sup>2</sup>. I was flooded with shame and shock. We weren’t fools – we did it only because the teachers told us to; and our tormentors were poor, but an alien kind of poor: rough, and missing school – and in front of teachers!

In that moment, rural was dumb and uncouth; but, in the Celtic/Romantic/Nationalist mythology that pervaded my environment, including school curricula, rural was also privileged as fostering community, purity, and spirituality. In all that song and story, my imagination soared. This was the Ireland famously “discovered” by the United States anthropologists

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<sup>2</sup> “Culchies” is an Irish pejorative term, denoting rough or unsophisticated rural dwellers.

Arensberg and Kimball (1940), and contested in subsequent Irish social research (see Byrne, Edmondson, & Varley 2001).

Another major gap in that myth was identified by a teaching colleague who hails from inner-city, working-class Dublin. Right through his own schooldays, all his teachers were from the country; in college he was the only city student in his class; and, when he took up his first teaching post in a city school, he was the only city-born teacher in that staffroom. He recalled that the Irish identity that he was taught in school, and learned to teach about in college, was rural. His city community's traditions, lore and music got not a mention. He is now the principal of a rural school in the mountains, and the concept of Irish identity explored there is complex and creative.

The Romantic-Ireland depiction of rurality also had little space for the perspective of the rural poor. Class harmony was presumed to prevail in the countryside. As James Gibbons TD (1973) said in the Dáil: "Rural communities are different. People of substantial wealth can live cheek by jowl with people who have no wealth at all. Neither seems to be injured by this proximity". The rural poor, who emigrated to escape working for a pittance for the rural rich (Murray & Feeney 2009), might be surprised at this reading of their situation.

#### Rurality in teachers' self-study and professional learning

Given the social change that is profoundly reshaping rural Ireland, what are the issues for rural teachers' self-study and professional learning? The first sign that this needs attention is the fact that rurality is not a significant factor in teachers' professional location choices. Therefore rural identity is not necessarily consciously thought out in relation to teachers' professional performance. The emphasis on self-study and professional learning in initial teacher education could draw in some of the issues highlighted here. There are implications for teaching in any rural area, prosperous or not (strengthening a sense of belonging and pride in place and culture, and environmental awareness); here I focus mainly on issues for teachers located in rural areas that are experiencing socioeconomic depopulation and marginalization.

The crisis reactions to the threat of change in the small-school structure have strong implications for rural teachers' self-study and professional learning. How can teachers build flexibility and windows on the possibility of different ways of doing things? It is too late to start trying this when parents and teachers are backed up against their school wall, resisting eviction. For many teachers, the grounded complexity of rural identity becomes important

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<sup>3</sup> The Irish equivalent of the Australian House of Representatives. Members are called "TDs" (Teachtaire Dála=Dáil Representative).

when they have settled into the locality, and parish and school life intersect as they coach local football teams, engage in local sports days and festivals, and join pressure groups to protect their community services. This is valuable voluntary work, but not necessarily part of their professional role.

A proactive professional awareness should ensure that teachers, from well before that point, reflect on their community setting. They should do this individually, and within and across their networks of colleagues in the parish, to consider questions such as: what skills can I build in my teaching work with the children, and in my co-enquiry with their parents, that will increase flexibility and creativity in relation to how we all think about and respond to painful changes? Small schools might, for instance, exchange teachers and groups of pupils for joint activities, to augment each unit's talent pool and open spaces for fresh thinking. School clusters, federations, hub schools (Ó Slatara & Morgan 2004) – all could become familiar ideas and inspire lateral thinking.

A further element in this reflection on rurality has to do with cultural identities. There is soul food for all in the great myths of this country, in our Irish and English language and literature, and in our cultural practices. However, how can teachers get this nourishment to flow in synergy with the possibilities and challenges of 21st century rural Ireland, and indeed with the very likely chance that a lot of their pupils will emigrate?

In our initial teacher education program, and our ongoing professional development, we need a dialogue with community members, to explore how, in their professional work in schools, teachers can feed into building healthy, confident, flexible communities with the optimism and vision to face forward and build a healthy local society, and a healthy future, wherever they go. This dialogue would begin with the same questions that I and my colleagues first framed as teachers of Travellers: whom are we teaching, what and how should we teach them, what do they want to learn, and how do they do it?

In short, we need much clearer reflection on our national and local cultural identities, on the intersections between education and the way we perform those identities, and on the need for teachers to learn to reflect on their performance in the light of wider social change and a vision for the future, for themselves as professionals and community members, and for their pupils and their education partners. And this must start with teacher educators building this vision, approach and skills into the initial and ongoing teacher education.

## **BOBBY**

Australia also retains a powerful mythology of the urban–rural binary spun from times past, often at odds with 21st century discourses of socioeconomic, cultural, educational, health and community wellbeing. My first images of rurality began at home. Whenever Dad filled the water bags, sealed the butter in its tin, loaded one hessian bag with bits of wood and axe, then another with potatoes and onions from the vegetable bins on the back veranda, plus the old single person cutlery set and battered tin mug, plate and frying pan, I knew he would be on the road out bush for another week. As a very young girl, rural Australia was constructed as a place where one had to be prepared, with a sense that self-sufficiency was necessary for survival. Later on, the boarders at secondary school conjured images of their lives on the remote sheep and cattle properties far out west beyond the Emerald line (Figure 1); and the rural areas of agriculture, crops and cattle closer in towards the coast. Those images and the meanings ascribed to them lay dormant for many years.

After the vicissitudes of that childhood and adolescence in a regional community and its 1950-1960s schooling, early adulthood in a capital city of early 1970s Australia was spent undertaking a scholarship funded initial teacher education program. The big wide world was waiting and, as it was for many contemporaries of that time, it was overseas that beckoned — anywhere over the seas — once the obligatory teaching bond period had been completed. Like all travellers coming to know their localised selves when viewed from afar, so too did my sense of rurality take decades to crystalize. Indeed, it has been the tentative inscriptions afforded through this reflexive three-way self-study analysis that has revived distinctive meanings of teaching in and teacher education for rural communities.

Fast forward 30 years to new images with deeper, more challenging meanings constructed through a collaborative research project conducted around the turn of the century (Singh, & Harreveld, with Hunt 1997). My perceptions of this world, its spaces, sensory objects and animal life (Merleau-Ponty 2004), constructed a conceptual framework for rural teacher education, including its regional and remote dimensions. What started out as a propensity for undertaking projects as a means of understanding my own teaching worlds has grown to become integrated with working on other teachers' projects through research higher degrees supervision. Through the projects, it is possible to become organically connected to multifaceted relationships, the ebbs and flows of power and perception in differentiated yet interdependent spaces and places (de Certeau 1984). Through their potent oracy the bush, its power and its passion can ready teachers to see the world through their students' eyes, through their travails and triumphs, through those of their families, friends and communities. For me those “touchstone” texts (Strong-Wilson et al. 2014) have become lodestar's, framing

educational questions encountered in the social, economic and cultural worlds of rural communities encountered through this project life.

These questions invariably cluster around the supply of support services for diversely different learners; access to and retention of appropriately qualified teachers and their ongoing professional learning; funding for infrastructure and recurrent resourcing needs. Here the politicised character of rural teacher education emerges as it is embedded in broader organisational dimensions governing changes in school curriculum, teacher education both initial and continuing while connected in quite complex ways to an unceasing evolution of technologies and digital devices. Furthermore, the illogicality of sectoral funding and artificial resourcing divides among early childhood education, schooling, training, university level education and community education provision is starkly evident in small rural communities (Singh, & Harreveld, with Hunt 1997). Yet pragmatically it is a feature of life with which rural education is confronted.

There are teaching jobs in Australia's rural communities. "Go west if you want a job" is the mantra for new teachers. A commitment to "country service" is rewarded in the larger school systems with various inducements to entice teachers to include rural teaching as a project in their professional lives. In addition, rural practicum placements may be actively promoted in teacher education programs. However, research conducted for the Rural Education Forum Australia (Halsey 2005) found that factors that mitigated against this included urbanized teacher education students' pre-existing personal and financial commitments, rural community capacity for accommodation, the cost of that accommodation and services, distances to be travelled and the lack of anonymity in small communities. Rural spaces remain at the mercy of the power of place to determine desires for ways of living in which the suburban and the metropolitan reign supreme.

This is a key point of convergence with Máirín's self-study from Ireland where current economic growth and in-migration favour larger towns and "accessible" rural areas (Central Statistics Office 2011). As Máirín also notes, these popular rural areas attract "rurbanites" — people willing to commute often long distances to work in urban centres, to have an urban lifestyle in a safer, greener environment, with cheaper housing and easier access to amenities such as quality childcare. In both countries, rural communities are being affected by variability of reliable access to 21st century information and communications technologies. A related point of convergence occurs as prosperity in one area (for example, economic growth in urban and metropolitan centres) impacts negatively on small rural communities. Máirín reports that environmental, cultural and ecological effects are compounded with high unemployment rates

in small towns and remote rural areas still reeling from economic forces beyond their control, gutted by emigration (out-migration), with consequential negative effects on individuals' mental health and physical well-being (Cleary, Feeney, & Macken-Walsh, n.d.; Nolan & Maître, 2007).

As I travel out west these days, it is the changing landscape that disrupts those earlier images. Hills appear where previously rolling savannah grew sweet grasses for sheep and cattle, where crops of sunflowers and sorghum stretched to the horizon. This ancient landscape has been recolonized by slag heaps of overburden in varying stages of revegetation, while others tower still raw and ragged. The coal trains stretch for kilometres, with engines front, back and in the middle to push their black gold to massive commuter ships plying the oceanic highways towards the hungry furnaces in far-off lands. The soporific boredom as hour after interminable hour the road waits to be driven is interspersed with moments of sheer terror as the behemoths of the resource industries barrel along both lanes of what passes for a highway. New signposts emerge from the shimmering noonday heat – not to the homesteads but to the mine sites, the accommodation camps and the new townships of the central and far west. There are now airports where once cattle were mustered by horseback in the dry paddocks and where from time immemorial Indigenous people nurtured this land of the Dreaming. The fly-in, fly-out; the drive-in, drive-out lifestyles of Queensland's resources boom workforce are telling their tales in the uber-urbanized café cultures of the coast, while multinational conglomerates fund community development partnerships as part of their loudly proclaimed local/global corporate citizenship. Yet the local is in the global and vice versa. All booms inevitably come to bust with renewed challenges for citizenship in rural communities.

I was never marginalized by rurality because I never really knew it as either insider or outsider. It was not consciously integral to my initial teacher education, nor to professional learning since that time. The rural was just there — the bush out back of the black stump — as unquestioned part of life and living. Today I may be interviewing for a research project at a school but by lunchtime on my last day I hear and heed Dad's words: "Get off the road by sundown because the kangaroos will be out, and always have enough supplies just in case you cannot make the next town". The more the bush appears to change, the more it stays the same.

#### PATRICK

Living and working "beyond the black stump" was not foremost in my mind when I took up my first teaching position in the early 1980s. Actually the town was not so remote; located in central western Queensland, it was closer to the regional places where I had grown up and

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completed my initial teacher education than many other areas where I might have been assigned instead. I recall answering in the negative when I was asked, “Do you know where that is?” after being told by telephone of my first school, and then locating it on a state map. I soon discovered that it was a site of considerable historical interest (and I attended a re-enactment of that historic event in the town later that year).

Instead of feeling that I had been consigned to “the outback”, I experienced a strong sense of anticipation and excitement: here was my first full-time, continuing, occupational role, in a new place with people I had not met previously. Here was an opportunity to put into practice what I had learned about secondary teaching at university and during fieldwork placements. At that time, there was an expectation – probably a formal requirement – that Queensland government teachers complete two years of “country service”, and I preferred to discharge that duty at the start of my teaching career rather than being instructed to move “out west” after teaching for a few years in a coastal location. Indeed, rumour had it that my peers and I would be rewarded for undergoing our “country service” at the start of our careers, by being able to nominate our preferred locations at the end of the two years. (This proved to be so in my case; at the end of my two years, I was granted my first preference of a large regional centre in South-East Queensland.)

More than 30 years later, I look back with appreciation and gratitude for all that I learned in that first teaching post. Like my colleagues, I worked hard, but I battled with classroom management (Danaher 1983). I threw myself enthusiastically into opportunities (such as working with the school’s student council) that I realised when I worked in much larger schools were not so readily available in bigger establishments. On the other hand, I had very little contact with the local community, except through attending church and acting a very minor role in a theatrical performance. I did not play or watch sport or drink in the town’s hotels, so that I did not meet many townspeople outside a narrowly defined circle.

My choice of teaching as a career was not surprising, given that my mother had been a teacher (she and I taught the same subjects, English and history); later both my younger brothers completed teacher education qualifications, although they ended up teaching at university rather than in schools. As long as I could remember, I had enjoyed learning (although some subjects more than others) and I had been fascinated by the practices of schooling and of teaching. My personal and professional identity was strongly and inextricably intertwined with being and becoming a teacher (and later a teacher educator in regional universities while researching rurality). So the principles and practices – if not the name – of self-study had long been part of my psyche: the urge to improve, to understand, to serve.

With regard to location, I had grown up in a small town of about 4,000 inhabitants on the Queensland coast, close to a regional city. I had no sense at the time of the town's location or size vis-à-vis other places in Queensland and Australia, except that I felt a little overwhelmed when visiting the regional city (where coincidentally Bobby grew up and lives now); I certainly felt no marginalization on account of not living in a city, let alone a metropolis. Nor do I remember experiencing discrimination or disadvantage because of gender, socioeconomic status or ethnicity. On the contrary: I have an abiding emotion of appreciation for being able to live my childhood and adolescence in what for me was a safe, stimulating environment where my brothers and sister still live and where I have an investment property. I experienced fulfilment and happiness that I recall fondly (and no doubt nostalgically).

At the same time, having taught subsequently in a large government school in Brisbane and a wealthy private school in Melbourne, I realise now that significant educational, political and sociocultural differences were at play more broadly and constituted a wider backdrop of socioeconomic status and inequity that helped to frame my professional practice but of which I was largely unaware at the time. More specifically, I have since contributed to research, and also read other academics' research, highlighting the considerable and often lifelong impact of the different levels of resources available to schools and classrooms, and furthermore demonstrating that rural locations continue to experience uneven and insufficient access to such resources. Likewise, despite the ongoing development and refinement of various communication technologies, physical distance continues to exercise a profound influence on the life choices, lived experiences and lifelong outcomes of members of regional, rural and remote communities.

At one level, therefore, my critical self-reflections on being a rural teacher are highly divergent from those of Máirín above. Apart from our experiences being in different countries in different hemispheres and with different approaches to our respective initial teacher education programs, the cultural constituents of the respective communities in which we have taught and lived are very different as well. At another level, however, there are important convergences between our two sets of professional experiences. One convergence relates to the politicized terrain on which particular educational practices are enacted – a terrain that constructs some places as more equal than others and that concomitantly positions other locations as sites of inequity and marginalization. Another convergence pertains to the shared conviction of the necessity and the utility of self-study as an indispensable resource for teachers' continuing professional learning – not only for individual educators but also for the schools in which they work and for the communities whom they serve.

Similarly, there are both resonances and diversities between Bobby's and my experiences and our reflections on those experiences above. The resonances derive in part from the sheer existential and experiential coincidence of growing up in and returning to the same geographical location. They reflect also the shared experience of completing teacher education programs in the same state jurisdiction, albeit undertaken at different institutions and targeted at working with different levels of pupils. Yet, despite these common occurrences, our professional trajectories have differed in significant ways in parallel with our separate life journeys, highlighting the individually unique, even solipsistic, character of such journeys and the meanings that we make of them. This in turn accentuates a defining characteristic of effective self-study. That is, such self-study can and does take multiple forms, including varying degrees of formalization, and needs to be contextually specific, yet its underlying purpose and importance traverse both individual and national boundaries.

#### **Data Analysis**

A striking similarity among the three preceding autoethnographic accounts of teaching in rural schools in Ireland and Australian respectively was how – in very different geographical, historical, political and sociocultural contexts – the classificatory categories of “rural” and its logical opposite “urban” ebbed and flowed across the authors’ separate experiences and their shared reflections on those experiences. In Ireland, supposedly rural villages are geographically relatively close (in Australian terms) to Dublin. In Queensland, geographical distances are much greater, yet there is probably more homogeneity across the urban and rural divide than in Ireland, owing partly to Australia’s much briefer colonial and postcolonial periods than in Ireland. From this perspective, as the authors moved physically between and within locations during their respective career trajectories, notions of “urban” or “metropolitan”, “regional”, “rural” and “remote” blurred and merged, morphed and transformed in concert with the complex interplay of wider forces and influences, including the operation of globalization and localization. For instance, the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008 that impacted severely on the “Celtic Tiger” economy of Ireland are seen in the migration from rural towns and remote communities, the phenomenon of ‘out migration’ with concomitant effects on local services such as the Gárda (Police) station, the post office and the schools. In Australia, the impact of the resources industries before and after the same financial crisis have had boom – bust effects on local economies in those regions most vulnerable to shifting populations, transport, health and human services, including schools.

All of this illustrates how the historically grounded and geopolitically enacted places and spaces of Irish and Australian teaching and teacher education frame and constrain the respective challenges and opportunities of rural education. More specifically, in both countries the metropolitan places of national and provincial capital cities can be interpreted as the sites of power determining educational policy-making, ranging from curriculum and assessment through to class sizes and the minimum pupil numbers if schools were to remain operational. Correspondingly, rural schools and towns can be understood as the spaces where school principals and teachers interact with their pupils and their families to implement – and occasionally to challenge – those policies. This interplay between places and spaces was a recurring theme in the autoethnographic accounts in the preceding section of the chapter. Another synergy was the increasing political consciousness of all three authors as they read and researched further about rural education and teacher education. A marked difference among the accounts was the strategies for deploying that consciousness afforded and/or contained by the specific contexts in which the authors conducted their roles and responsibilities as educators and subsequently as teacher educators.

Part of the wider significance of this similarity and this fluidity lies in their resonance with the study's conceptual framework, focused on de Certeau's (1984) distinction between places and spaces. As we noted above, de Certeau (p. 117) helpfully encapsulated that distinction thus: "In short, *space is a practised place*" (emphasis in *original*). The autoethnographic accounts presented in the previous section of this chapter illustrated multiple means by which the places of rural schools and the communities in which they are located can be transformed into engaged, lively and sometimes subversive spaces – for instance, when teachers join forces with parents and other community members to resist school closures in Irish villages or when Australian communities take a stand to resist the fly-in/fly-out and drive-in/drive-out staffing policies of multinational resource companies. Rurality offers a conceptually rich space to disturb, disrupt and dissemble teachers' and teacher educators' knowledgeable ignorance (Daniel 1960; Firestein 2012) of the Irish Travellers, of Indigenous Australians, of refugees, of miners, of pastoralists, of the diversely different ways of being and becoming in rural communities. Pedagogically, we have aligned ourselves with Rancière's (1991) ignorant schoolmaster, Monsieur Jactot, to ask inconvenient questions of ourselves and of our teacher education students; for example, what do I [not] know about these people, how can I find out, what and how can I teach them? Each question leads to layers of answers, none of which is singular or simplistic, yet the dialogic encounters that ensue teach others and confirm for ourselves that doubt, uncertainty and the unknown are fundamental to learning.

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Another synergy that has helped to frame the preceding autoethnographic accounts is a shared experiential knowledge as well as a well-developed theoretical understanding of wider changes to the teaching profession in both countries, and also continuing and sometimes highly politicized changes to teacher education and our contributions to it as teacher-researchers and teacher educators. Hence the focus in this analysis of the data selected from the broader study informing this chapter to include in the autoethnographic accounts presented above has been on complex and fluid relationships – between urban and rural locations, between places and spaces, between educators and learners, between professionals and their multiple communities. Far from being fixed essences or static binary pairs, these phenomena have demonstrated their capacity for mobility, for shifting valences, for challenging mindsets, for contesting power relations and for transforming supposedly settled policies and practices. Self-study has been and continues to be a vital ingredient in the mix, by extending and sometimes upsetting existing understandings and by enhancing the quality and the impact of teachers’ professional learning. This impacts on the ways in which we prepare teachers for these places/spaces through a deliberate pedagogical commitment to challenge, even to subvert, a seemingly homogenized teacher education that in neither Ireland nor Australia accords critical engagement with the generative, stimulating and transformative professional learning experiences of our accounts.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter is part of a wider comparative, exploratory case study deploying the attributes of collaborative autoethnography to analyze the authors’ experiences as teachers in rural schools in Ireland and Australia. In presenting selected data from this study, we have sought to demonstrate and illustrate some of the virtues and values of self-studies in rural teacher education – in particular, by bringing experiential depth and reflective insight to bear in shining new light on de Certeau’s (1984) enduringly significant conceptualization of places and spaces. Through this self-study process, we have created a new dialogic space (Denzin 2014) as we have written ourselves into one another’s lives, shared our identities, co-produced a critical consciousness and imagined a new politics of conceptual and pedagogical possibilities for rurality and for rural teacher education. Methodologically, we have connected with our touchstones, then regressively and progressively journeyed to past and present events in accordance with an autoethnographical process of self-study.

The key finding that we have highlighted in the chapter is the need for, as well as the diverse forms taken by, rural teachers’ self-study strategies. Based on the autoethnographic accounts presented here, those strategies have both a spatial and a temporal dimension. There have been

geographically specific and contextually localized approaches, both between and within Ireland and Australia, to framing the authors' respective critical self-reflections in ways that 'make sense' in the places and spaces in which they are enacted. Likewise, these approaches have varied over time, in the different phases of the authors' career trajectories as well as in broader shifts in epochs that frame educational policy-making and practice at school and university levels.

We see this diversity of forms as a major strength of self-study, because it enables and supports a range of locationally appropriate techniques for maximizing educators' understandings of themselves and others as they perform their occupational identities. Whether those places and spaces are the dry stone walls of Ireland, the black stumps of Australia or the equally evocative and iconic emblems of rurality in other countries, critically focused, dialogically framed and politically nuanced self-study is crucial for teachers' and teacher educators' professional learning.

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