Conceptions of Art Education Programs Held
By a Rural and Remote Australian Community

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This article discusses the results of a one-year study in a physically isolated school community in Queensland, Australia. The decision-making processes in the selection of school subjects became the focus for interviews conducted with the school community (students, parents, and teachers) and the vehicle for identifying the held conceptions of art education programs. The school community's conceptions of art education programs were examined and analyzed resulting in the identification of four categories: (a) cognitive abilities and expression, (b) the enjoyment of practical tasks, (c) employment for girls, and (d) the lack or existence of theory within the art education programs. The results suggest that the rural and remote geographical location of an Australian community has an influence on the held conceptions of art education.

Australia has a population of 20.5 million and an area of 4,812,500 square miles, amounting to a person every two square miles (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). Of the population of Australia, 85% live in urban areas, and many of these urban contexts would physically be very similar to those in Europe and the United States. However, there are large areas of Australia that are not like anywhere else—“the outback” and “the bush.” This article discusses the results of research conducted about art education in a rural and remote community in Queensland, Australia.

At over 1,000,000 square miles, Queensland is the second largest Australian state, in area, and the third largest populated state with 4 million people within its borders (ABS, 2005). Ninety-five percent of the population lives in the southern coastal areas leaving the rest of the state sparsely inhabited. Queensland has within its borders the Great Barrier Reef, idyllic beaches, lush tropical rainforests, and a harsh arid interior. The economic base of inland Queensland is agricultural, relying on beef and wool production punctuated by areas of intense mining (ABS). The sparse population of rural remote Queensland, 159,000, is concentrated in small towns and large ranches (ABS). Traditionally, the ranches have been affluent and owned by generations of established families with the small rural and/or remote towns consisting of agricultural support, commercial and transport industry workers and their families. Consequently, the economies of these rural communities are very dependent on the health of the agricultural and mining industries.

Public education in Queensland is offered and administered by a single large state government department, Education Queensland, that
has recently developed strategies to address rural and remote education (Education Queensland, 2003) even though 89% of Queensland is classified as rural and remote. Not all geographically isolated students are facing the same educational issues due to the differences in rural and remote areas. Consequently, there appears to be a lack of concern regarding the uniqueness, complexity, and diversity that exists in education in rural and remote areas (Doolan & Zimmer, 2002; Walton, 1993).

This study was initiated by the relatively low numbers of students selecting art as a subject for their last 2 years of schooling (senior studies) in a rural and remote community.

During the subject selection process for senior studies, a range of factors influence secondary school students (Oakes & Guiton, 1995). The geographical location of the community that the student lives within is also a factor that shapes the decisions that students make in the selection of secondary school subjects (McKenzie, Harrold, & Sturman, 1996; Montgomery, 2004)
To provide emic data on a rural and remote community’s held conceptions of a school subject, the school subject selection processes for senior studies (Years 11 and 12) was used as a focal point. The process of decision making for selecting areas of study in high school are shaped by the conceptions of subjects held by the decision makers. The conceptions of the art education program may then influence whether students choose to undertake art as part of their senior studies. This may influence the standing or value of the art education programs within the rural and remote community and may ultimately have an effect on students’ career and educational aspirations.

In this study, conceptions are understood to be the qualitatively different ways in which people see, understand, and experience phenomena in the world around them which can be described and categorized (Marton, 1981). An informal, open-ended conversational interviewing process was employed to collect the data needed to elicit information that was based on participants’ knowledge and experiences.

The Cultural Context

Rural Queensland is classified as all of the state excluding major metropolitan areas and any townships within 50 kilometers of those areas; the remote areas of Queensland are those 150 kilometers inland from the coast (refer to Figure 1) (ABS, 2005). This study was conducted in Heatherton, which, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) descriptors, is both rural and remote.

Heatherton is the center of the Flowing Shire (County) an area of 26,000 square miles with a population of approximately 2,250; one person per 11 miles (Heatherton Information Centre, 2004). The closest metropolitan center is either 250 miles east or 325 miles west. The Flowing Shire is predominantly an agricultural grazing area. The country to the north is dominated by beef cattle production, with the south country committed to wool production (Heatherton Information Centre). The local town council of Heatherton operates a caravan park and a public swimming pool. Municipal sale yards have recently been established to cope with the increasing number of cattle and sheep being sold in the district. Heatherton has one bank, a post office with deliveries made twice a week, three hotels (pubs/bars), and one small food store. Television reception consists of three free-to-air channels, with satellite television recently being made available. Dial-up Internet access is available at long-distance phone rates (Heatherton Information Centre). The state school in Heatherton is a “high top”—it caters to students from preschool to Grade 12 on the same site with an enrollment of 260 students, 76 students in the high school (Heatherton State School, 2005).
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**Design of Study**

The move from Year 10 (junior studies) into Years 11 and 12 (senior studies) is a time when students and their families are making decisions about and choosing school subjects for the last 2 years of secondary education. These decisions and reasons for choosing, or not choosing, a school subject reveal participants’ immediate and embedded conceptions of school subjects, and that ultimately shapes the decision-making process. This process was used as a vehicle for identifying how the participants see, understand, and experience art education programs, and informal, open-ended conversational interviews were conducted. This method allows flexibility in the questioning of participants, as the questions follow whatever direction may be appropriate for the conversation. This direction or purpose was defined and redefined by the interviewer, as the conversation continued, gradually being focused to probe the areas that were deemed relevant or problematic in terms of the research (Brady, 1976).

The conversations began with a broad introductory question or entry question (Gerber & Bruce, 1993). To ensure authenticity and content-oriented descriptions, the question must have some significance to the participants’ experiences and be indirect so as to ensure depth in the responses (Gerber & Bruce, 1993). For this study, the entry questions were: (a) for the student participants, “You have/will become seniors; what decisions have/will you made/make concerning school?”; (b) for the parents, “Your children have/will become seniors; what decisions have/will you made/make concerning school?”; and (c) for the teachers, “Your students have/will become seniors; what decisions are/will they make concerning school?”

The interview-conversations were undertaken with all of the Year 11 students (5 female, 4 males) and 6 of their parent/s early in the academic year. Interviews were also conducted with 12 of the 16 Year 10 students (4 males, 8 females) and 8 of their parent/s; and 6 of the 8 high school teachers (2 males, 4 females) during the subject selection process later in the academic year. The length of time the educators had been teaching within the setting was taken into account. As a result, three educators who had spent periods of 6 months to 2 years at Heatherton were interviewed, as were 3 teaching staff who had spent between 5 and 10 years at the school.

The student participants included both those who do, and do not, study art as a school subject. The Year 10 students and their parents were included because they were experiencing the subject selection process at the time of the study. The Year 11 students and their parents were included as they had recently been through the selection process and were able to reflect on their decisions and thoughts; and the secondary
teachers were included because they can inform and influence parents and students (Toomey & O’Donovan, 1997).

All the data was analyzed in two phases: initial categories and then review of categories with the assistance of a co-judge. The data analysis took place after each stage of the two data collections. The issue of sub-group-specific (parent, teacher, and student) and gender-specific conceptions was considered. However, with further analysis, it was discovered that no one conception was common to a sub-group or gender. A final analysis was conducted with all of the data from both stages. This allowed the categories of the conceptions to be dynamic until the final analysis, and resulted in the identification of four categories of conceptions of art education programs held by an Australian rural and remote school community. The four categories are: (a) cognitive abilities and expression, (b) the enjoyment of practical tasks, (c) employment for girls, and (d) the lack or existence of theory within the art education programs.

Art programs are “thinking differently” and “expressing yourself.”

This conception appears to be based on the ideology that art and art education is only a process through which an individual can express and become conscious of his or her emotions (Lowenfeld, 1947). This premise is over 50 years old and yet the participants’ conceptions of the art programs in Heatherton are still strongly pervaded by it, even though it has been largely discarded in urban cultural contexts (Foster, 1983; Freedman, 2000). This may be attributed to the lack of access to contemporary cultural activities resulting in a traditional concept of the role of art and art education (Clark & Zimmerman, 2000).

Thinking differently

When you are drawing and working you think in different ways, other ways. (Student)

You have to think different things. (Student)

The participants communicated that learning within the art programs is experienced and understood as a cognitive ability, an ability to perceive, remember, learn, and understand (Arnheim, 1986; Eisner, 1992). This resulted in the conception that art programs enable the ability to think in a different way, a way that is different from the “norm” or other school subjects.

You think differently, that is why I like it. You can talk and discuss things, it is different to other subjects. (Student)

During the interviews with student participants some of them communicated envy for this ability or “talent” to think differently. There also seemed to be a sense of exclusion of not being ‘in’ on the ability and that you either have it or you do not and there is no expectation of the art education program delivering this ability.
I can't. I just don't have the talent, I would love to be able to sit down and just think like that, I've tried heaps of times and I just give up. I ’pose it wasn't that bad, but I just don't have the talent—doing art ain't going to fix that. (Student)

The student participants who did not study art, experienced and understood the art program as being beyond their reach, as their conception is that only a select few possess these cognitive abilities to think differently. This conception of the art program as thinking differently was solely expressed by the students and is not specific to a rural and remote community (Siegesmund, 1998). The participants also conceived the art programs as not only an expression of thoughts, but also of feelings.

**Expressing yourself**

Art is internal, and some people don't understand that you are getting your feelings and what you are thinking out. (Student)

*It is expressing yourself, what you mean, understand, and feel.* (Parent)

*You are getting what’s inside, out. All the stuff.* (Student)

This expressive viewpoint is conceived as art programs enabling an exploration of emotions and was conceived as playing. This playing is where students make their own decisions, individually explore artistic media, ideas, and create opportunities for self-expression. Because this process of play gives students freedom of choice, “You get to play around and do your own thing” (Parent), it can be conceived as being unregulated (Gadamer, 1995).

*There are no rules in art; it is whatever you want. It is hard for people to understand that there are no rules for art because there are rules for everything else.* (Student)

When art education is conceived as having no rules or boundaries then there is also the conception that there is no right or wrong.

*You can't say that it is right or wrong, it just is.* (Student)

*Art is different. It’s not right or wrong, it is whatever you think it is.* (Parent)

*There is no right answer with art, it just is, which means no one can tell me I am wrong.* (Student)

Many of the students communicated how unusual and pleasant it was to work and have worked in an area that appeared to have no definitive answer. However, some students struggled with this nonconforming and unpredictable process of play and conceived it as lacking control and structure, “Art is all sort of mucked up.” (Student), and as having no apparent defined academic outcomes or results.
In graphics (technical drawing) you have to get it right, and you know when it is right. Whereas, [in] art it doesn't matter if it is right, wrong, or whatever; it just sort of keeps going. (Student)

This conception of art education as thinking differently and expressing yourself was articulated by all the student participants, whether they enjoyed or were at odds with the conceived intrinsic qualities of art education. The conception of art and art education as expression is a widely held assumption (Siegesmund, 1998). However, the rural and remote geographical location of this school community may have influenced this conception. This is perhaps because the students have not experienced and do not have the knowledge of other subjects in the arts field which may share this conception. These subjects are not offered within the Heatherton State School curriculum and are not available extra curricular within this rural and remote community (Heatherton State School, 2005).

…Where else do you get to put you into your school stuff, it's like it's the only place where some of me is in it. (Student)

Art education is the “Robinson Crusoe” of arts subjects in Heatherton.

Art programs are “having fun doing and making things.”

Having fun

At Heatherton State School the majority of those interviewed conceived the art program as activities that provide or give pleasure, “Fun, that's what it is” (Parent); “Art is fun, you enjoy yourself, not like other subjects” (Student). This conception appears to focus on the feelings of pleasure and enjoyment that the art program invoke in the participants. When students are having fun and enjoying themselves it is conceived as being free to do what they wish.

Art is nothing serious, mucking around, whatever, fun. (Teacher)

…We do whatever, fun stuff, anything is OK. (Student).

This conception of art programs may originate from the experience of the Priority Country Area Programme (PCAP) visiting artist program.

When artists visit Heatherton State School as part of the PCAP visiting artist program (Priority Country Area Programme (PCAP), 1996, 1997, 1998) the students do not participate in the usual curriculum. The entire morning and/or afternoons are assigned to artmaking. This is because the artist has limited time in Heatherton, artists only visit twice per year and PCAP encourages the school community to avail all students of the art experiences. When this devotion of time occurs the experience is conceived as unusual because there is this break from the normal curriculum. Students, parents, and teachers then conceive the art program as being removed from the curriculum, something that is only done on a special occasion when an “expert” comes into the
community, something that is fun instead of an integral component of education (Stankiewicz, 2001).

**Doing and making things**

In Heatherton, art education program consist of two components, practical and theory. The practical is where students experience various two-dimensional and three-dimensional art media to create an object or artwork. The theory is where students learn about the ideas, explanations, and knowledge of art or artists of the present and the past (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (QBSSSSS), 2000). All of the participants conceived the art education program as doing and making something that can be held and seen, a physical representation of thoughts and feelings.

…Art is the things that you do. You are not just sitting there, you are doing things, making things. (Student)

You just do stuff, grab it, try, and if it doesn’t work do it again. (Student)

Most art education programs utilize physical material with a view to the production of something observable or real (Dewey, 1989). However, by conceiving art programs as solely doing and making, the theorizing appears to be largely ignored (Stokrocki, 1986).

This conception has its roots within the PCAP cultural programme (PCAP, 1996, 1997, 1998).

All the art we did in art was making stuff, when Miss would say we are going to do art, it was making and doing stuff from those PCAP boxes, no writing or stuff about artists. (Student)

When those artists visited they always made stuff, like paintings and pottery. (Parent)

The PCAP program reinforce this conception through the visiting artist program, as mentioned previously, where students are only involved in practical artmaking but also in their provision of art kits. The art kits consist of materials and instructions of how to make and do to assist teachers, these are only available to teachers in rural and remote areas. These kits (PCAP, 1996, 1997, 1998) have no critical or historical experiences within them resulting in this conception of art education programs as making and doing.

Only rural and remote schools participate in the PCAP cultural programs, resulting in the geographical location of rural and remote influencing this conception of the art education programs.

**Art programs are “jobs … for the girls.”**

A community’s hierarchy of values underlie what is important, familiar, liked, preferred, esteemed, and encouraged (Serpell & Boykin, 1994). The cultural values of the community of Heatherton infuse all
facets of daily life, from the economic value of a job and school subject to the gender that is assigned to jobs and school subjects.

**For the girls**

Heatherton is a rural and remote community with traditional values and beliefs, where the males and females take on particular roles within the community.

*You are talking about a community that still works on traditional values... Here they still perceive that the male goes out and earns the money and the female has the kids and cleans the house.* (Teacher)

This delineation of roles permeates modes of thought and action and can be described as cultural stereotyping (Colley, Coomber, & Hargreaves, 1994). This type of stereotyping occurs when the community's beliefs and values dictate the direction and roles of community members and art education programs.

*...For the girls. Up here, we are a small town, girls follow in the art, home ec (Home economics), typing sort of area and the boys follow through the Shop a (woodwork) and Shop b (metalwork), graphics (technical drawing) sort of area. That's just what you do here.* (Teacher)

The cultural stereotyping of school subjects in Heatherton is influenced by the predominate gender that is seen in the occupation or job.

*There is a gender difference but it relates to what job am I going to get with that subject? The boys only aim for apprenticeships and the girls go into businesses or become a secretary or whatever, cause that is what they see, here, in Heatherton.* (Teacher)

When jobs or occupations are seen and experienced within the community as gender specific, then the school subject that relates to that occupation will also be gender specific (Colley et al., 1994).

*Like if they (boys) wanted to do typing, they would be too scared to say they wanted to do it, because a secretary or a receptionist is a girl job. With art it is like that too, a girl thing, because the only art job here is the art teacher and it has always been a lady.* (Student)

*Most boys do woodwork or metal work, apprentice related stuff, not art, 'cause here that [sic] is what boys have always done.* (Parent)

In Heatherton over 90% of boys choose woodwork and metalwork (Heatherton State School, 2005) as they are conceived as male specific, *apprentice subjects*, because the jobs in Heatherton related to these school subjects are understood as male jobs, they have a role, an accepted place in the community, economic survival. The conceived role and accepted place of art education program in Heatherton is something the girls do because of the traditional values of the rural and remote community of Heatherton.
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Jobs

The participants overwhelming expressed the conception that school subjects are all about what will have the greatest economic value for students’ post-school lives.

*Out here subjects is [sic] about jobs.* (Teacher)

The economic health of the rural and remote community is a pervasive influence on the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of rural and remote school communities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Moriarity, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003). Students and parents see, experience, and understand that art-related employment does not exist in Heatherton and as a result do not choose art as a school subject.

‘Cause I needed something I could use to get a job here, Heatherton. Something that got you somewhere, art can’t do that. (Student)

I chose subjects that are going to get me a job in Heatherton. Typing, BP [Business Principles] all that computers stuff, they are a sensible choice, not art. (Student)

The majority of participants in this study did not conceive the art education programs as having economic value in Heatherton.

There are no careers out here that use art. So they don’t see it as a real choice for a job. (Parent)

As a result, there is relatively little interest in art as a school subject as it does not relate to the majority of students’ daily lives (Montgomery, 2004; Thurber, 1997).

Here they can’t see where art is used in this town. It is like is it going to get my kid a job? And they can’t see work in this town. (Teacher)

If there were jobs around that were arty it would be different. There is nowhere around here with art sort of jobs. It would be hard to get a job around here with art. (Parent)

The selection of art as a school subject is conceived as possibly jeopardizing the chance of employment in Heatherton.

A lot of the kids, when are they ever going to use art for out here, nothing. It could cost them a job down the track if they do it. (Teacher)

I need a job in town, art is not going to give me that, and I need subjects that will get me a job. (Student)

This conception illustrates the influence the economic health of rural and remote communities has on the choices, roles and/or success of art education programs. The existence of rural and remote communities is dependent on its precarious economy, so in Heatherton there is a hierarchy of economic value placed on school subjects from most likely to get a job in Heatherton to least likely.
...Art is not conceived in this community as something you can be successful at. Because it doesn’t give you money to buy a carton (24 bottles of beer), it doesn’t pay for your rent and your bullets to go piggin’ (shooting of wild boars). They don’t see it as earning money, here. (Parent)

However, some participants did conceive of art education programs as leading to employment.

Arty jobs that they are interested in, they might need art then. (Parent) ...Art has helped me decide what I want to do for my future. I wouldn’t have thought of architecture, if I hadn’t done art. (Student) Cause I have done art I know I like it a lot and cause of that I want to have a career that is related to art. (Student)

But, it is with and because of the knowledge that they will have to leave Heatherton to pursue this career path.

They do art cause they want to go in art-related careers, architecture, and design, stuff that is out of Heatherton, they do it ‘cause they want to leave. (Teacher)

The kids who done [sic] art have left, if you want to leave here, you do art. (Parent).

This held conception of the art education programs is related to the aspirations that the school community has for its children. Often parents in rural and remote communities have low educational aspirations for their children (Elliot, 1987). This has been attributed to low socioeconomic status resulting in low educational aspirations, as tertiary education is believed to be financially and socially beyond reach. (Haas, 1992). The majority of families in rural and remote areas have low socioeconomic status (McKenzie et al., 1996; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000), and this is also true of Heatherton (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). However, within Heatherton, the school community also communicates high educational aspirations for their children and conceives that the art education programs can give their children opportunities outside Heatherton. This is further explained within the category of art programs are easy and theory.

Art programs are “easy” and “theory.”

The two senior art programs that are available to students in Heatherton are Art and Practical Art. Art is a Board subject; the course of study is based on a syllabus that has been approved and issued by the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies (QBSSSS, 2000). Results from Board subjects can count in the calculation of an OP (Overall Position) which is the dominant selection device used by Queensland tertiary institutions. Practical Art is both a non-Board subject and Board-registered subject and was developed by Heatherton.
State School. Results in non-Board subjects cannot be included in the calculation of an OP (QBSSSS, 2000).

**Easy**

Practical art or *prac art*, as it is known in Heatherton, is conceived as, *easy*. However, it is conceived as easy in comparison to the other art program; locally referred to as *art or theory, straight art, board art*.

...Prac art is not like theory art; it is mucking around, easy art. (Student)

Prac art is seen and understood as easy as there is a limited theory component within the program (10%), and limited theory is conceived as not having to write, “Prac art, is just a bludge lesson. It is easy, you don't have to do no theory, and you don't write anything.” (Student)

Consequently, subjects that are structured with a greater proportion of practical tasks or projects and less written are conceived as easy.

You don't have to write as much and that is seen as easy for some of them. (Teacher)

A result of prac art being conceived as easy is that students can undertake the subject when there is no other choice or option in school subjects.

...They do prac art cause there is nothing else to do, no other choice. (Teacher)

This occurs in Heatherton because

You are limited with the subjects you can offer, you have to make a choice. It is very hard when you don’t have enough teachers and timetabling can only be so wide, it is really hard for the kids. Sometimes they choose subjects not because they want to, but they haven't got a choice that is all there is, we don't have anything else. (Parent)

**Theory**

*Theory art is writing where you have to learn things, question things and understand things.* (Student)

The *theory* in the art program is the historical and critical experiences, the learning about and reviewing artists, their work, influences, and theories behind their artwork (QBSSSS, 2000) and “…research work and written assignments.” (Parent). When the art education program is conceived as theory the participants solely focused on it being a Board subject or OP subject,

Senior art is an academic, OP subject. It gets kids into Uni. (Teacher)

It (Art) leads to TAFE (Technical and Further Education) and Uni (University), you can get an OP with it. (Student)
In Heatherton OP or Board subjects are conceived as giving students an opportunity to attend tertiary education, which is only available outside of Heatherton.

*OP subjects are important, they give you a choice, TAFE, University, stuff that's not here.* (Parent)

This results in the school community conceiving an OP and OP subjects as enabling students to leave Heatherton.

*Heatherton is out of bounds. There is a big wide world out there, go out, explore it and get a good paying job. An OP can give you that, so she has to do OP subjects, like art.* (Parent)

The parent participants conceive that the art education program can give their child a greater choice and opportunity, outside Heatherton. This is may be because what they have seen, experienced, and understand is that 7 out of the 12 students in their rural and remote community in the past 3 years who studied *Board Art* went to University.

*Shae and John did straight Art and there are others too, they did it, they went to Uni. It can be done.* (Parent)

**Conclusion**

Within this study the rural and remote Australian school community communicated the reasons for choosing, or not choosing, art as a senior school subject, revealing the immediate and embedded conceptions of art education programs that ultimately shape this decision-making process. The results of this research suggest that the rural and remote geographical location of an Australian community, Heatherton, is a factor that influences the held conceptions of art education programs. The rural and remote geographical location can be classified as a technical organizational factor as it determined the presence of the PCAP programs and influenced the timetabling, teacher availability, and subject availability (Oakes & Guiton, 1995). It can also be classified as a sociocultural factor, as the values of the community influence the gender that is assigned to jobs and school subjects and also the economic value of a school subject (Oakes & Guiton, 1995).

This study revealed the pervasive influence of economic survival of a rural and remote community on the roles and values of art education programs. The art education program was conceived as having little value and possibly jeopardizing employment within Heatherton. However, the art education program was also conceived as providing opportunity for further study and/or employment beyond this rural and remote community. Research has shown that the arts can provide employment opportunities and improve the economy of rural and remote communities (Jones, 2002). However, within the rural and remote community of Heatherton, these opportunities are conceived by members of the school community as existing beyond its borders.
Teaching art in rural and remote communities offers many challenges and rewards, as rural and remote communities vary dramatically due to differences in population composition, geography, and nature. This then results in different cultural, social, and geographical contexts ensuing different learning environments, attitudes, beliefs, values, and altered learning needs. Consequently, all rural and remote communities cannot be treated the same, with one solution applied to all. It is the teachers within these communities that need to be innovative, dynamic, and flexible, and understand and respond to the needs of their community. In most rural and remote towns there is a clear sense of community identity and of mutual dependence on community members. As a result, the local school and staff are important elements of the community, and school-community links are often strong (Sidoti, 2001). By developing and strengthening links with the community through creative partnerships with local community organizations, businesses, and industries, this can then build innovative learning environments and experiences for students and may shift beliefs and attitudes about education and subject areas.

However,

You can not just step into a small town, a small community and want make a difference then and there and change everything by being a bull at a gate. You step into a small town and you be yourself. You learn to mingle and get on with people. Your first year should just be sit down, shut up, see what is happening, say nothing, do nothing, and go nowhere. That is what you have got to do, come in get to know people, learn about everything and work it all out. You have to work out where you can fit. (Parent)

In most rural and remote communities, like Heatherton, the dynamics of the social roles and relationships need to be understood and negotiated. Many teachers in Australia have grown up and been trained in metropolitan areas (ABS, 2005) and when they teach in a rural remote town they have to adjust to the physical demands of distance, isolation, as well as the social and interpersonal demands of their new community. This aspect can be particularly difficult as the social roles and expectations in “face-to-face communities” (Wagner, 1979, p.141) are learned early and “outsiders” need to find an agreed and accepted role and way of operating within the community (Stacey, 1994), as the parent stated, “You have to work out where you fit.”

In Australia, 30% of newly qualified teachers will teach in rural and remote communities similar to Heatherton (ABS, 2005). Yet, many will have never experienced working and living in these communities and may hold onto the myths and romanticized ideas that pervade literature, poetry, songs, and people’s thinking, resulting in preconceptions or stereotypes concerning the people and rural and remote Australia. But
living in this cultural context goes beyond the clichés of phrases such as “the outback” and the images and movie characters in *Crocodile Dundee*, and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. In order to address some of the difficulties art teachers and teachers in general experience, teacher education institutions need to expose students to a broad representation of rural and remote contexts. They need to become more familiar with the diversity of rural and remote locations and develop an understanding of the range of potential experiences through direct personal experience. By teachers, schools, universities, and governmental education departments acknowledging and understanding the differences in education in rural and remote cultural contexts and then addressing this difference in teacher education, policy, funding, and research (Thurber, 1997; Montgomery, 2004), art education can then become relevant and connected to the daily lives of those living in rural and remote cultural contexts.

References


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