

REFA – better together

Megan McNicholl, Chair, Rural Education Forum Australia

LONELINESS

I feel so alone,
Just me, here by myself.
No one cares, no one notices.
Endless monotony surrounds me,
Just the same everywhere I look.
Nothing new to see and discover around here.

I can't stand isolation.
If I died no one would know for days, may be weeks !
The emptiness of my existence slowly saps the life from me.
No one to talk to, nothing to talk about.

It's so hard to fit in, so hard to be accepted.
I think I should go,
find somewhere friendly,
find somewhere exciting.

THAT'S IT ...

I'M GOING BUSH AGAIN!

Bridget Reynolds (Dirt Roads and Desert Roses 2002 RICE)

In preparation for today Steve, Paul and I held a teleconference to explore the themes each was hoping to convey to the assembled audience and I have to say I began to wonder just how this old 'hay seed' was going to contribute.

"Those of us who live in the bush have been researched to death" I protested, "The information is coming out of our ears. I have heard it all before!"

I am not an expert researcher, geographer, demographer.

I am a mother, wife and educator who has lived and worked in the bush all my life and spent most of that time trying to make sense of the avalanche of information and research that is designed to inform our thinking!"

In the search for a place to start my conversation I revisited a collection of writings from women in South Australia's outback. These I found in "Dirt Roads and Desert Roses" a wonderful book that celebrates the lives of these women and the environment in which they live. Their messages are honest and authentic.

Bridget Reynold's poem "Isolation", spoke to me. I heard the voice of someone who had rediscovered her love of country life after spending time in the city.

At the same time it occurred to me that Bridget's poem might also be a metaphor for the challenges that face many of us who provide services in rural and remote Australia.

How to tell the story of what it is like to live in the bush and at the same time make a contribution that will help to progress the delivery of basic services (like education and health) in ways that honour and recognise the lived realities of the Bridget's (and Brian's).

Enter the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA)!

Many of you will be aware that in February 1999 the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) began a National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education.

The inquiry conducted a significant national audit of education in rural and remote areas..

While many of the findings and recommendations contained familiar themes, the Isolated Children's Parents Association's (ICPA Aust) attention was drawn to recommendation 4.3 (HREOC) that called for "the development of a national rural and remote education strategy. With State and Territory components, that takes into consideration telecommunications, transport, subsidies and allowances to families and students, sporting and recreational facilities, teacher training and regional planning."

In short, it challenged those of us who had contributed to the Inquiry to take a long hard look at what needed to be done to ensure that the HREOC recommendations were not lost.

In April 2001 the Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia (ICPA Aust) and the National Farmers Federation (NFF) hosted a *Rural Education and Training Roundtable* in Canberra.

The *Roundtable* was a success and probably also unique in terms of its approach – meeting together were parent groups and rural associations, independent service providers, State and Commonwealth officers, teacher union representatives, ATSI, rural health service experts, family support providers and more.

Those gathered together acknowledged that there have been considerable achievements in many aspects of rural education and training. However, there was a shared belief that there are a range of recommendations and reports containing issues that need to be further addressed, and that if we were to achieve long term solutions, then we needed to focus on creative ways of building collaborative partnerships to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Appropriate models were discussed. The roundtable considered the National Rural Health Alliance model and identified the diversity of its representation as a real strength.

However, it took another Roundtable to galvanise our reasons and agree to form a collaborative national rural education structure called the Rural Education Forum Australia (REFA Inc).

In essence REFA has focused on:

- bringing people together
- identifying peak issues
- influencing communities
- influencing policy
- being a forum for ideas
- building networks.

In essence REFA is the story and a unique means for building and bridging new networks and relationships. Status, power and authority are not its focus.

The evolution of REFA has been an organic process. “Together is better” is our mantra.

We believe that we have created an entity that is responsive, nurturing, collaborative and passionate, with the capacity to generate space and opportunity for new ideas to be discussed and shared

As a forum REFA:

- holds roundtables (not meetings) employing a conversational model
- understands that people become people in the midst of people
- makes decisions and acknowledges ‘place’ by situating ourselves in regional contexts
- take policy makers with us, providing them with a valuable opportunity to interface with the people on whose lives their policies impact.

Currently a key focus of REFA’s is on “preparing and supporting new professionals for the new century in the bush!”

Rural and regional communities are often described as a ‘professional nursery’ to which we attract graduates who take on positions, build up their skills and experience, which enable them to secure a position on the coast or in the city.

[Paper : “Attraction and Retention of Professionals to Regional Areas” (Prof R L Miles (CQU), C. Marshall (CQU), John Rolfe (CQU), Sally Noonan (QLD Dept State Development)]

The bush has a significant cohort of salaried workers ‘in’ the community not ‘of’ the community. People, who I have on occasion, heard locals describe as ‘tourists’ because (it is perceived that) their bags are always packed and ready for that much anticipated transfer !!

Our communities need people who have the skills as well as the confidence to unpack their bags and put down roots. To stay in town for the weekend, join local organisations, share their many skills and talents with the wider community. In essence build supportive relationships and networks.

On the other hand the challenge for the ‘locals’ is to develop welcoming strategies to ensure that this is a comfortable and supported process.

These strategies should acknowledge that rural and remote communities have distinctive dimensions that include:

- distance
- lack of a critical mass
- fish bowl lifestyle
- sharing of multiple spaces.

REFA is committed to ensuring that rural and remote students receive the best education possible. This means, amongst other things, ensuring that there are sufficient well-qualified teachers available who want to teach in country schools.

REFA wants high quality, well-targeted support to be readily available for all pre-service teachers as an incentive and encouragement to seek a career in rural and remote teaching.

REFA has heeded the call “ the extent of the problem demands a collaborative effort – a national approach – involving local, state and federal authorities” ... and is attempting to meet this challenge.

On Wednesday 9 March REFA hosted the *Rural Teaching First Symposium* in the theatre of the Alice Springs Campus of the Charles Darwin University.

The key purpose of the Rural Teaching First Symposium was to explore the feasibility of REFA sponsoring the establishment of a nationally based support network for pre-service teachers who are interested in a career in rural and remote teaching.

The success of the National Rural Health Network (NRHN), which provides a range of supports to undergraduate health professionals including doctors and nurses, is one option that has informed REFA’s thinking.

A critical component of the relevant support that REFA believes is necessary to ensure that teacher graduates are attracted to a country based career, is radically improving the pre-service support networks for them and raising the status of rural and remote teaching.

Forty people – pre-service teachers, university academics, departmental representatives, members of REFA, teacher union, ICPA and the National Rural Health Network (NRHN) – had a very open and extended conversation (read talked to each other) that basically achieved three things:

- firstly people (from all States and Territories) shared their stories about rural teaching
- secondly, representatives from the NRHN shared the story of the evolution of their organisation and highlighted the benefits of their network in supporting and preparing their members for rural and remote practice and living
- thirdly, it put everyone present clearly in the picture about the value of young professionals working together and supporting each other as they prepare for careers in the bush.

In relation to tackling real issues for real people the symposium clearly demonstrated that bringing people together to share and to hear and then to respond in their own ways is what in my view is going to actually deal with the things that really matter for people like Bridget and I.

As Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) in the Paradox and Promise of Community have said, “ Staying centred on what the common work is, rather than on single identities, transforms the tension of belonging and individuality into an energetic and resilient community.”

And now for another challenge which goes to the heart of many of the papers and discussions at this conference.

Working together is what we need to do more of to deal with what is “killing us in the bush”!