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Beginning the school principalship in rural and remote Catholic Schools in Western Australia

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BEGINNING THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP IN RURAL AND REMOTE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

The role of school principal has become inextricably linked with educational reform and accountability (Moller, 2009; Crow, 2006; Fullan, 2004). The challenge confronting principals in contemporary times is balancing the interplay of accountabilities and reforms with the core business of school principalship namely leading learning and teaching. It is well documented that successful student learning outcomes require strong leadership and quality teaching (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Robinson, 2007). It is the balancing act of meeting these external demands with the intrinsic motivation of leading a school that confronts school principals. Even more so, the beginning principal, in addition to navigating a school community through reforms and driving learning and teaching has to deal with the newness to the leadership position *per se*. Further compounding these features of school leadership for a new principal is the context of principalship in rural and remote schools. This paper presents from research examining the professional and personal needs of beginning school principals appointed to Catholic rural or remote schools in Western Australia from 2003 – 2007. This paper initially describes features of rural and remote schooling. Literature is explored pertaining to beginning principalship within these types of school. The research methodology underpinning the research is then outlined. The findings of the study are subsequently presented followed by a discussion of the data. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations for consideration.

FEATURES OF RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLING

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) draws from the Australian Bureau of Statistics to provide four categories of geographic location to describe school location. These four categories are metropolitan, provincial, remote or very remote (ACARA, 2012). Metropolitan locations are considered areas in each State or Territory within close proximity to its capital city; provincial is an administration division within a State; remote is an area considered spatially distant from the capital city of that State or Territory; and very remote is an area considered spatially very distant from the capital city. It is also noted that the more distant a school is from large regional and metropolitan centres, the smaller the size of the school. Small schools which typify remote and very remote

schools range from 1-100 student enrolments (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Catholic education in Western Australia utilises these geolocations descriptions with regards to its schools. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'rural' will include schools designated as provincial and remote locations described in the ACARA geolocations (ACARA, 2012). The term 'remote' will describe those school designated as very remote geolocations (ACARA, 2012).

There are significant issues confronting rural and remote regions in Australia that noticeably impact on the school community and therefore, the school principalship. These issues include: rural communities experiencing social and economic decline with famers facing extreme hardship due to unreliable climate, market volatility on primary produce and global competition. Moreover, the relocation of commercial activities out of the rural community has created unemployment and the migration of rural workers to cities and mining regions for work (Wallace & Boylan, 2010). These issues are further exacerbated in remote indigenous communities where there tends to be "chronic social and economic disadvantages" (Wildy & Clarke, 2012, p.65).

In addition to this description is the trend in student results for rural and remote locations from the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. According to the 2012 NAPLAN data, results from highest to the lowest in all areas of literacy and numeracy are as follows: metropolitan, rural and then remote (ACARA, 2012). Whilst there are some minor variations noted, the overall picture in national testing suggests a disadvantage due to geolocations with metropolitan students consistently outperforming students in rural and remote locations (Anderson, et al., 2010; Wildy, Clarke & Elkin 2010). More specifically, in rural and remote schooling where there is high Aboriginal student populations, on average, "students experience lower participation, attainment and learning outcomes compared to students in non-remote locations" (Western Australian Department of Education, 2011, p.iv).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Typically, a principal's first appointment is within the rural or remote geolocations (Murdoch & Schiller, 2002; Clarke, Wildy & Pepper, 2007; Ewington,

Mulford, Kendall, Edmunds, Kendall & Simms, 2008). The inexperience at this level of leadership in any school and in particular in rural or remote school requires considerable attention. It is well documented that beginning principals are required to deal with a broad curriculum, national testing, multi age classes, limited resources and funding, inexperienced teachers and community demands (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Anderson, et al., 2010; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). Pietsch and Williamson (2009), suggest that there is an "intensification of workload" for principals as they contend with these many demands and these impacts significantly in their ability to lead the school (p. 3).

The technical and managerial skills required to lead a school community are broad and demanding (Daresh, 2006). Daresh (2006) suggests that the technical and managerial areas which the beginning principal must contend with include staffing, financial management, school site maintenance and development, resourcing and pedagogy. Pietsch and Williamson (2009) describe these areas as "exogenous pressures", pressures that compete with one another and are influenced by one another. In addition, Pietsch and Williamson suggest that in rural and remote schooling, these areas are magnified greatly due to the staffing component being typically small in size, generally inexperienced and with limited leadership experience.

In addition to the above challenges, the beginning principal's professional development is often limited. Researchers have noted that key hurdles to access professional development are school location and appropriate professional learning to their school context (Wildy & Clarke, 2012; Lock, Budgen, Lunay & Grace, 2012). Depending on the location of the school, accessibility to quality professional development can be limited. The more remote a location, the more expensive and challenging it is to bring the professional development to the school. Equally, travelling from the school to professional learning events can be financially prohibitive (Lock et al, 2012). Another important component to the beginning principal's professional development is interaction with peer principals. Compounding the access to professional learning, rural and remote principals can be isolated from peer networks and professional support (Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Further, professional learning opportunities need to be contextualized to the needs of

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the particular school. Remote schooling, particularly with high levels of indigenous student populations require culturally sensitive and appropriate professional development attune to the particular context (Western Australia Depart of Education, 2011).

Key to the professional development of the beginning principal is their relationships with their colleagues. Mentoring new leaders with experienced, successful and committed principals is viewed as an effective means of supporting the new principal (Crow, 2006; O'Mahony & Matthews, 2006). O'Mahony and Matthews (2006), report on the benefits of mentoring new principals. These benefits include reduced feelings of isolation, reduced stress and frustration, opportunity to be more reflective, increased learning rates, professional growth and improved problem solving skills (p.18). In addition to the professional growth of the beginning principal, the mentor provides the beginning principal with an entrée into the principal association that forms the new leader into an understanding of the leadership culture (Crow, 2006; Southworth, 1995).

Increasingly, literature points to rural and remote schools being generally undifferentiated from their large metropolitan counterparts (Starr &White, 2008; Wildy & Clark, 2012). Whilst the desire for the end result of a student's time in any type of schooling environment might be success and post school opportunies, the accountabilities and expectations by educational authorities place the same accountabilities and expectations on rural and remote principals as for principals in metropolitan schools (Wildy & Clark, 2012; Clarke & Stevens, 2009). Murdoch and Schiller (2002) argue that the principal's role in small schools is considered a 'scaled down version' of larger schools by educational authorities (p.1). This imputes that the resources available to lead a school in rural and remote area are equal to metropolitan schools; however, this situation is not the case. With limited leadership roles within the school and a small staff that are typically inexperienced, there are restricted opportunities for delegation and meeting the external administrative demands. These complexities add to the principal's responsibilities and increased workload. Wallace and Boylan (2007), recommend that rather than view education from a one size fits all approach, that policy and decision makers consider a 'rural (remote) lens' when considering rural and remote schooling. Essentially Wallace and Boylan suggest: "…

it involves a reversal of thinking – to begin in rural (and remote) places, looking outward for policy rather than reacting to policy developed in other places and times…" (p. 4).

The influence and presence of the school within a rural and remote community is widespread and generally considered as a positive sign for that community (Wildy & Clarke, 2012; Starr & White, 2008; Anderson, et. al., 2010). The influence of the community on the school and hence, the principalship is equally significant. There are 'tacit' rules and expectations placed upon the school principal that require the principal to be contextually literate (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Wallace & Boylan, 2007, Halsey, 2011). Some researchers suggest that rural and remote communities can be parochial and conservative by nature (Halsey, 2011; Wallace & Boylan, 2007; Clarke & Stevens, 2009). The principal is required to navigate his or her relationships with the local community mindful of his/her professional and communal responsibilities. The high visibility of the principal within the community can also demand more participation of the principal within community affairs. For the beginning principal this participation can be problematic due to the workload demand of leading the school (Wildy & Clarke, 2012). Principals need to develop strategies to negotiate and create boundaries with regards to participating in the broader community (Halsey, 2011).

Clarke and Stevens (2009) indicate that the potential public and private life of rural and remote principals require careful attention by the principals themselves, the communities in which the live and the education system which has appointed them. Professional, social and personal isolation encountered by individuals can significantly impact on the professional life and personal wellbeing of the beginning principal (Clarke & Stevens, 2009; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). Halsey (2011) describes the principal's personal and social life as one akin to living in a 'fishbowl' (p.9). This type of experience can be deleterious to beginning principals, particularly as their performance in the role can be openly surveyed by the community.

METHODOLOGY

This research into the experiences of beginning principals in rural and remote Catholic school principals in Western Australia was interpretive in nature, and used

two qualitative research methods to collect data: semi-structured interviewing and researcher-generated field notes. First time principals appointed between 2003 and 2007 were invited into the study. From a potential cohort of 20 principals, eight elected to participate. Three of the principals were situated in the remote zoned schools (Broome Diocese); and five in the rural zoned schools: three in the Bunbury Diocese and two in the Geraldton Dioceses. Table 1 provides an outline of the principals and their schools geolocations. Figure 1 situates the diocesan locations on a map of Western Australia.

Table 1

Profile of the Principals according to geolocations

Gender	Remote	Rural	Total
Female	1	4	5
Male	2	1	3
Total	3	5	8

Each principal participated in an hour-long semi-structured interview. Where possible, the interviews were conducted in the principal's work place to ensure a more genial and non-disruptive atmosphere. However, two principals of remote schools were visiting Perth and decided that it was convenient for them to be interviewed at one of the researcher's work places. The use of an interview guide (Hennick, Hutter & Bailey, 2011) ensured that there was consistency in the interview process. The questions in the interview guide were based on the four areas by which Catholic school principals are appointed to the role. These areas of leadership are theological, pastoral, educational and administrative (CEOWA, 2000). With the permission of the participants, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the data collection and to allow a thorough examination of what was said (Bryman, 2008). Transcriptions were made available to the interviewees, thus allowing verification of the information provided and clarification of any mooted points. Member checking, as this method is termed, is a necessary component of qualitative research adding to the credibility of the data (Stake, 2010; Bryman, 2008).
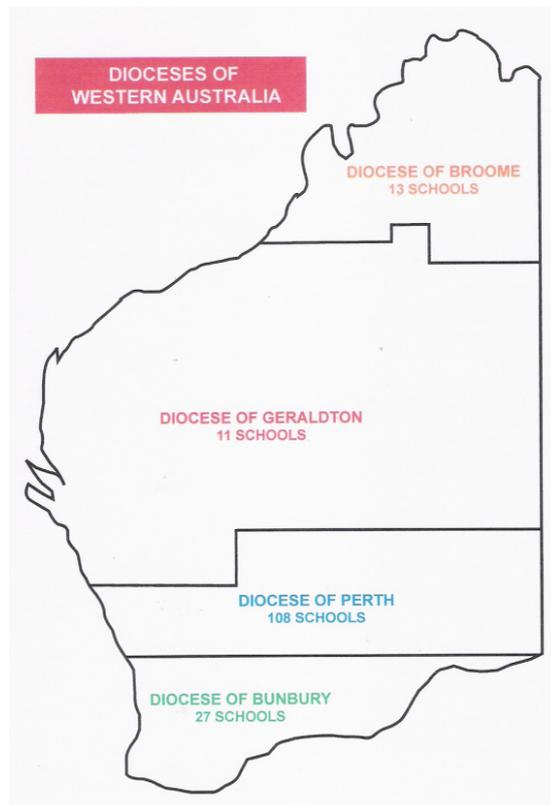
Figure 1: Diocesan and Archdiocesan locations in Western Australia

This research utilised Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of data management and analysis. Miles and Huberman view analysis as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display and drawing and verification of data. These highly interactive and iterative processes occur before data collection begins, during the research design and planning phase, during data collection and post data collection. The findings from the research are presented under two headings: rural settings and remote settings.

FINDINGS
Rural Settings

A review of the responses from the five beginning rural principals indicated eight main themes. Three of these themes pertained to the technical and managerial skills of the principalship, in particular, administrative requirements of the role, school size and the handover process from the previous principal. All five rural principals found the administrative demands of the role extremely broad, quite challenging and seemingly endless. Their three main concerns related to staffing

issues, financial management and working with school boards. Attracting qualified, experienced Catholic staff was especially difficult for these beginning principals.

Four of the beginning principals believed that the small size of the country school limited the scope of their role. Specifically, they felt keenly the absence of administrative support normally provided by an assistant principal. They believed that, as beginning principals, such an absence placed an undue demand on their time and confidence to perform the role. Further, all raised concerns over the handover process from the previous principal, remarking that often times the time was ill spent and pointless.

The five beginning rural principals also raised three themes with regard to cultural and personal relationships. These were collegial support, the nature of a small Catholic rural community and the role of the Catholic Education Office. All five beginning principals appreciated and acknowledged the need for peer support as they began their principalship. In particular, they recognized the benefits of being able to discuss issues with a peer principal. All remarked on the parochial nature of the small rural Catholic school community. For example, two of the beginning principals commented that they felt under the spotlight with regards to how they conducted themselves within the school and parish community. In addition, all acknowledged the importance of ongoing support that the Catholic Education Office provided newly appointed principals in rural areas.

The beginning rural principals highlighted two themes concerned with their own sense of self-identity: the feeling of isolation and loneliness, and the importance of resiliency. All commented on the professional isolation and the personal and social loneliness inherent in the role of principal in a rural school. Such isolation and loneliness, they believed, was acerbated by the fact that they were beginning principals. Three of the beginning principals also commented on the importance of being resilient, of being able to recover after experiencing setbacks. One, in particular, quickly realized that she needed to be courageous when she encountered an intensely difficult time.

Remote Settings

A review of the responses from the three beginning remote principals indicated eight main themes. Two of these themes related to the technical and managerial skills of the principalship, specifically issues pertaining to staffing and concerns over educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. All three beginning principals commented on the challenges of recruiting and retaining Catholic teachers to work in remote locations. Limited applications were received for positions and typically staff in their three schools were inexperienced and had limited exposure to remote schooling. Further, all three beginning principals commented on the dire situation surrounding the education of Aboriginal children in remote schools. The two key issues they faced were a lack of attendance by Aboriginal children and the children's poor levels of literacy and numeracy.

The beginning remote principals raised three themes with regard to cultural and personal relationships. These were peer support, support from the Catholic Education Office, and issues relating to remote communities. All three recognized the importance and need of peer support. However, the remoteness of their schools' location limited face-to-face contact. In most cases interaction occurred through telephone conversations and email. All three beginning principals valued and acknowledged the support of the Catholic Education Office staff in the central and regional offices. However, as with their peers, most support came through phone conversations and email contact. Remote community issues focused predominately on the central role the Catholic school played in the remote community. All three principals saw their schools as "real focal points" for the community and as the representative of the Catholic school. Such issues impacted on their time and role.

The beginning remote principals highlighted three themes concerned with their own sense of self-identity: the notion of vocation, the importance of resiliency and concerns relating to loneliness. All three beginning principals saw their role in Catholic education as one of vocation. Each commented on his or her desire and commitment to serve as a leader of a Catholic school community, especially in a remote area. All three highlighted the critical need to be resilient in the face of the demanding role of their work, noting that at times they were totally stretched with the requirements of their leadership role. Finally, each of these beginning school

principals experienced a strong sense of loneliness due largely to the remote location of the school. In particular, they commented on the professional, social and personal isolation inherent to their situation.

Table 2 presents a summary of the key themes reflected in the research on professional and personal needs of beginng principals in rural and remote settings in Catholic schools in Western Australia.

Table 2

Summary of key themes

	Rural Settings	Remote Settings
Professional Needs	*Technical and Managerial Skills* 1. Administrative requirements - Staffing issues (inexperienced staff) - Financial management - Working with school boards 2. School size - Limited leadership support 3. Handover from previous principal *Cultural and Social Relationships* 4. Collegial support 5. Professional isolation 6. CEOWA support	*Technical and Managerial Skills* 1. Staffing concerns 2. Educational outcomes for Aboriginal students *Cultural and Social Relationships* 3. Collegial support 4. Professional isolation 5. CEOWA support
Personal Needs	*Self Identity* 7. Loneliness and isolation 8. Resiliency	*Self Identity* 6. Loneliness and Isolation 7. Vocation 8. Resiliency

DISCUSSION

The qualitative data gathered from the researcher generated field notes and interviews of the eight rural and remote beginning principals revealed four common professional needs. Within the key area of technical and managerial skills, all beginning principals highlighted the professional concern over attracting appropriate staff for their schools. This situation appeared especially difficult for beginning

principals in remote areas. Three further common professional needs centred on cultural and social relationships. All eight beginning principals, whether rural or remote, were most appreciative of support and advice from their peer colleagues. Further, all acknowledged the assistance and ongoing support that the Catholic Education Office provided newly appointed principals. However, despite such support, beginning principals in both rural and remote regions reported on the sense of professional isolation that they experienced, particularly those beginning principals in remote regions.

The data also indicated two main differences between the professional needs of rural and remote beginning principals. Rural principals articulated a greater range of technical and managerial skill requirements beyond that of staffing concerns. These administrative requirements included financial managerial support, issues pertaining to working with school boards, implications relating to small school size and negative school handover experiences with the previous principal. Remote principals, on the other hand, highlighted, professional challenges encountered in educating Aboriginal children.

Responses from the eight rural and remote principals detailed two common personal concerns within the area of self identity. These concerns focused on loneliness and isolation, and the related understanding of the need to develop a personal strength or resiliency. Beginning principals in rural and remote areas not only felt a sense of professional isolation, they also endured a feeling of personal loneliness and isolation from friends and loved ones. Beginning principals in the remote regions especially felt such emotions. Because of the professional and personal challenges that they experienced, beginning principals in both rural and remote regions clearly articulated the need to 'toughen up' and become resilient in the fact of such trials. One point of contrast was that those beginning principals in remote regions also described their leadership role as one of service and vocation. That is, they felt a special calling to lead in a remote school.

The findings from the research reinforced current literature surrounding the professional and personal needs of the beginning principal. The technical and managerial skills required to lead a school are complex and demanding. Literature

identifies that the 'workload intensification' experienced by beginning principals is significant and demands that these areas be addressed (Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). Literature suggests that educational authorities need to reexamine the 'lens' in which they view rural and remote schooling. There is strong indication that a 'one size fits all' mentality prevails when demanding school accountability to broader system priorities and requirements (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). As suggested by a number of researchers, educational authorities need to consider rural and remote schooling with a different 'lens' when developing policies and procedures (Wallace & Boylan, 2007; Wildy & Clarke 2012; Murdoch & Schiller, 2002). With a more context specific view of these types of schools, there can be a critical reflection from educational authorities to garner an understanding of the support that is required that can alleviate some administrative burdens.

The socialisation of the beginning principal into their role as school leader is an important feature of literature (Lock et al, 2012; Anderson et al., 2010). This research undertaken with rural and remote beginning Catholic school principals, highlights relationships with the community, colleagues and the CEOWA. Literature draws attention to the importance of the beginning principal's preparedness to participate within the broader community to which the school belongs and understand the important role the school has within the community (Wildy & Clarke, 2012; Starr &White, 2008). Literature focusing on the social dimension of the principal's role within the community suggests that it is important that the principal has a public profile and presence; however, this presence can be problematic due to the potential impact on an already time poor beginning principal (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). It would be important that the beginning principal understands the milieu in which the school is located; however, of equal importance is that the community understand the workload responsibilities of the new school leader. The school board can be an educative source and provide support and encouragement to the new leader. As parents and community members, the school board can provide a positive entree into the community and safeguard the beginning principal from any potential social *faux pas*, excessive participation in community events and educate the new leader into the needs of the community in a more paced manner.

The relationship the principal has with his or her colleagues has been a significant comment by all participants of the research. The beginning principals value greatly the wisdom, knowledge and collegial understanding of their peers. Literature supports this finding and recommends that to overcome the professional isolation that is encountered by beginning principals, principal colleagues and principal associations engage more fully with the professional and personal needs of beginning principals (Crow, 2006; O'Mahony & Matthews, 2006). Mentoring is strongly recommended in the literature as a way of nurturing the professional needs of the beginning principal and is regarded as an effective tool in socializing the new leader (O'Mahony & Matthews, 2006). Of equal importance is that the partnering of the mentor and mentee take into consideration the context of the schooling environment and where possible, 'face to face' meetings occur at the actual school site (O'Mahony & Matthews, 2006).

The research has identified the important role the regional office play in the ongoing support of the beginning principal. Access to the regional officer and consultants has alleviated some of the concerns of the new leader. The location of the regional office is an important element in addressing the contextual needs of rural and remote schooling. The professional services offered by the regional office would ensure that the context of the schools circumstances is addressed. This feature of support offered by CEOWA is reflected in the literature as it goes a long way in ensuring that a rural and remote lens is upon the nature of this type of schooling context (Anderson, et al, 2010).

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research into the professional and personal needs of beginning principals in Catholic rural and remote schools in Western Australia reveals a number of areas that require attention with regard to supporting the new leader. The authors present four recommendations for consideration. These include: the incumbent principal needing to understand the community in which the school is located and any communal responsibilities pertaining to the principal's role; educational authorities developing a rural and remote 'lens' for decision and policy making purposes; alleviation of professional isolation through considered and purposeful actions by professional principal associations and educational authorities; and preparation

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programs that are underscored with realistic issues and concerns of leading a rural and remote school.

First, the preparation of the beginning principal into the new leadership role needs to ensure that there is due time spent in understanding the communal part of the principal's role within the school and its broader community. Appreciation of the milieu of the community and its parochial nature requires time. The utilization of community leaders and school board members to ensure that the beginning principal is supported, encouraged and included will ensure that the school is a vibrant part of the community. Particularly, inclusion of the school leader into community activities will alleviate potential social and personal isolation experienced by beginning principals.

Second, educational authorities need to be mindful of the context to which the rural and remote schools operate. There is no argument that the students in rural and remote schools deserve a quality education. Accountability demands placed on schools to deliver the educational outcomes is necessary; however, there needs to be a mindfulness by educational authorities that rural and remote schools usually have a small number of staff who are typically inexperienced and or limited in leadership skills who have to action the requisite accountabilities. Professional support to these schools requires timely, accessible and context specific assistance by consultants who understand the nature, culture and needs of the school. Placing a rural and remote lens to decision and policy making activities will support more targeted initiatives that will improve the current educational gap that exists between rural and remote schools and their metropolitan counterparts.

Third, the role of the professional associations and the educational authority need to enhance their relationships with the rural and remote beginning principal. The professional isolation accounted by beginning principals can be lessened by structured, ongoing and context specific programs. These programs can include strong mentor-mentee relationships with the mentors being trained in understanding the rural and remote context; quality time given for the mentor to have face-to-face meetings with their mentee in the rural and remote school site; and targeted professional activities that address the context specific needs such as remote principals gathering

to address remote specific issues. Underpinning these possible initiatives is appropriately funded support that does not 'eat into' a limited remote / rural school budget.

Finally, preparation programs for aspiring principals and newly appointed principals must connect the requirements of leading schools with practical ways of doing so in the rural and remote setting. These developmental programs need to place a greater emphasis on the practical skills required of school principalship within these locations. For example, preparation and developmental programs should have input from community leaders in rural and remote locations who address the cultural and contextual framework of the location and the importance of the public profile of the principal within the community. Exemplary principals who have led rural and or remote schools need to offer their insights into the joys and challenges of principalship. Within Catholic education, rural and remote parish priests should address aspirants and beginning principals, highlighting the importance of the Catholic school in the broader community with a focus on the school's Catholic presence and mission. By connecting the 'theory' with the 'practice' of school leadership in rural and remote contexts, the beginning principal can be more effectively prepared to lead the school.

CONCLUSION

Quality rural and remote education is essential for the many students whose family livelihood lies in rural and remote Australia. Underpinning quality education is strong leadership. It is well documented that rural and remote schools are typically the first appointments for principalship (Murdoch & Schiller, 2002; Clarke, Wildy & Pepper, 2007). This trend is evident in Catholic education in Western Australia. The complexity of leading a school in an increasingly accountable and changing educational landscape, newness to the role of principalship linked with the geographical isolation of rural and remote schools all provide extensive challenges to educational authorities, school communities and most specifically, individual school principals. However, these challenges are not insurmoutable. With careful preparatory leadership programs, the adoption of a rural and remote lens by educational authorities, context specific professional support and an engaged community, beginning principals in rural and remote communities can thrive.

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