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Walking-creating for fostering teachers' education in peripheral coastal communities

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Walking-creating was adopted to probe orientations toward communities, while early career teachers were on clinical placement in the remote South West Peninsular of England. The aim of carrying out walking-creating events was to elicit whether and if so, the extent to which, early career teachers were sensitive to the communities where they had been placed and hence, had begun to question deficit discourses tending to adhere to peripheral landscapes. We explored whether they were replacing these negative discourses with hopeful ones. We present a study of one early career teacher who during our creative activity disclosed how place awareness had been developing through interactions within the community. The novel walking-creating methodology is informed by a generative theorising of peripherality so as to contextualise the complexities of the multiple drivers likely to be coalescing in teachers' peripheral placement communities.

Keywords: peripheral; coastal; teacher education; walking methodology; creative

Introducing peripherality

The 'leafy suburbs', a phrase frequently heard in the English education policy context, identifies cosmopolitan communities that bestow schooling that prepares the majority of their young people with appropriate skills for success in contemporary knowledge-based economies (Gibb 2010). This discourse encapsulates current policy orientations, favouring neighbourhoods in pleasant suburbia that are deemed far less troublesome

than remote communities, namely, ones that fall outside of the taken for granted metrocentric worldview. The proximal suburb is a landscape with which metropolitan administrations are comfortably familiar, while communities situated on the periphery are challenging and relatively unknown, with remote coastal and rural landscapes often attracting collective cultural nostalgia for a long since outdated way of life: one ‘not only beyond reach, but which in itself becomes pathological’ (Corbett 2021, 170). That is, while such sites may be seen as quaint and perhaps even romantic, the peripheral is, nonetheless, considered a site of deficit, specifically one with poor education provision often delivering outcomes that are out of step with policy objectives. For instance, in the English case, analyses of administrative data by Stokes et al. (2020) have shed light on the underperformance of pupils in coastal areas as compared with similar non-coastal school counterparts. Underachievement is highlighted at the end of compulsory schooling (Key Stage 4) across a range of outcomes, including GCSE certification, in coastal areas.

A growing body of scholarship seeks to apply distinct approaches to unpacking peripheral contexts and hence, to understanding the education that takes place within them and the challenges associated with the territory (Gruenewald 2003). An informed theorising of education in peripheral areas is pursued, so that the notion of social justice can be applied. This requires acknowledgment that education comprises more than questioning the distribution of resources and, further, demands that dominant discourses that serve to marginalise and disempower voices on the periphery are challenged (Cuervo 2016). This approach brings the periphery to the fore, through processes of decentring. That is, there is deliberate re-focussing away from the metropole, challenging its dominance in agenda setting and questioning the relevance of one size

fits all approaches to education policy and practice, specifically when delivered across a diverse national topography (Gristy et al. 2020; Roberts and Guenther 2021).

In this paper, we propose a novel creative approach, that of walking-creating with early career teachers in their peripheral placement community. We address a longstanding problem, that of recruiting and retaining teachers in such communities. To set the scene for the walking-creating case study presented below, a generative theoretical framing relevant to the specificities of education in peripheral communities is explained and adopted, because of the insights it offers with regard to understanding the deficits associated with remote schooling across the globe. Having set out in brief the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention encountered in peripheral places, we explore the place-based innovation of introducing early career teachers to placement communities through walking and set out the affordances of our novel walking-creating method. The findings from one creative walking event are reported in the form of postcards illustrating key issues disclosed by the early career teacher participant. The discussion draws on the generative framework to elicit the challenges facing this teacher in developing her place-aware practice (White and Downey 2021). The closing remarks return to the affordances of walking as an effective creative practice for engaging early career teachers with communities.

Theoretical framing of peripheries

Scholars of rural education have advanced theoretical frames to mitigate the narratives of deficit emerging from metro-normative views of the periphery and its education provision. As underscored by Thomson (2012, 3), comprehending a specific community's 'thisness' is necessary for educators when they are seeking to engage with 'the specificity of place, and how it is that local action is delimited by contexts'. The

rural social space framework (Reid et al. 2010) is useful in this regard as it assembles the dimensions of geography, demography and economy to theorise the space that underpins education in peripheral communities. All three dimensions are inextricably linked. Simply put, geography, where the settlement is located, intertwines with the demographic profile of who lives there and why. Equally, the economy sustaining the community cannot be divorced from its location and people. This framing of the rural social space outlines complexities and notably, acknowledges that there are diverse forms of peripherality, with neighbourhoods experiencing these dimensions differently.

While acknowledging the concept of rural social space, we contend that it is important to emphasise the dynamics of the periphery, namely, its ever changing state, resulting from and responding to, changes within and without the focal neighbourhoods. To do this, we build on the former concept and introduce the generative approach developed by Balfour et al. (2008) to frame peripheries. The three drivers that advocates of generative theory identify comprise forces, namely, centripetal and centrifugal forces, that have shifted people and capital towards and away from the metropole during different eras of societal change. The proponents of this generative lens further point to the issue of agency in communities, which relates to the dispositions and will of peoples, whilst also referring to the agents, such as the civic structures or officers of the government that support families. The third driver that is called upon to comprehend how peripherality is to be understood is that of resources, which pertains to the availability of material as well as psycho-social reserves. The generative lens is adopted for the current paper, because the dynamic concept on which it is founded assists with gaining understanding as to how a community is positively and negatively impacted upon by these various factors interacting; in the past and still in the present day. Acknowledging the dynamism of these drivers permits us, as educators and teacher

education providers, to work creatively and productively with the ‘diversity of lived experiences and ideas’ of residents as well as ‘the drivers that enable or disable the transformation’ (Balfour et al. 2008, 102) of peripheral communities.

Teacher supply in peripheral communities

When closely examined, the issue of teacher supply shortage tends to crystallise in certain locations, with areas peripheral to the metropole having been identified as hard to staff in comparison to their suburban counterparts. With the focus on the impact of peripherality, challenges in staffing have been extensively catalogued: different explanations are emerging in different countries regarding the observed teacher retention and recruitment issues specific to their remote regions. The espoused belief that the most significant contributor to robust educational outcomes is the quality of the teaching continues to fuel popular media and policy calls for reforms in order to guarantee that there is a strong supply of quality staff recruited and retained in peripheral communities’ schools (Sutcher et al. 2016; Ovenden-Hope and Passy 2020)

Researchers who have investigated supply shortages have pointed to the significance of financial and personal burdens for staff working in certain remote regions (See et al. 2020). These involve the wages that school staff receive and some initiatives to attract pre-service teachers to remote schools have taken the form of bursaries and other financial incentives, but with only limited success. In certain administrations, when salaries are determined on a local or regional basis, these can be insufficient for sustaining the additional financial burdens of living remotely. Additional personal costs have been reported by educators in terms of lack of access to desired lifestyle amenities and limits to social and family contacts due to residing at distance from populated urban and suburban centres. A preference for new teachers to seek out their first employment near to their site of initial teacher qualification similarly

persuades some to remain in populated centres and to reject remotely situated schools as feasible job choices.

The work conditions can contribute further to the negative perception of these remote schools as being undesirable (Cuervo and Acquaro 2018; Tran et al. 2020). For instance, teachers taking on responsibilities for delivering across multiple curricula subjects and for out-of-field teaching are well documented, while the lack of attractiveness for individuals aiming to further their classroom-based careers and work in education leadership, has also been highlighted. Typically, small communities' schools find it difficult to fund a large number of teaching staff, which can impact on the quality of early career support available for new entrants. Similarly, opportunities for career development for mid-career educators can be curtailed by organisational threats, including those of closure and merger of small schools. Finally, the local population can bring pressures with regard to teachers' capabilities to respond to the plethora factors, with which, local residents, students and families are dealing, such as multiple complex forms of marginalisation specific to remote communities. In brief, remote communities' schools have attracted widespread stigma, deficit narratives and are not without challenges, thereby exacerbating the problems of retention and recruitment of teachers.

While financial disincentives and workplace considerations might deter early career teachers and encourage established educators to move away, these drivers are shaped by and help to feed, the common sense negativity surrounding teaching in communities other than those situated in 'leafy' suburbia. Interventions to breakdown the negative mindset associated with peripherality have been widely introduced in pre-service training programmes, with the goal of encouraging long term commitment to teaching and remaining in post in these so called 'hard to staff' communities (Masinire

2015; White 2015; Corbett and Gereluk 2020). One strand of these interventions is in-person real life physical exploration of a focal territory, for this shows newly arriving outsiders how things are done differently and at the same time, demonstrates that there is potential for teachers to fulfil a useful role, in-place. It is the physical activity of being ‘out and about’, walking the community and meeting with residents that potentially challenges preconceptions and begins to help early career teachers to ‘interrogate their pre-existing assumptions and beliefs about what it means to live and work effectively in a rural setting and teach students who may be different than themselves’ (Downey 2021, 68).

Walking-creating methodologies

An innovation in place-based pedagogy has been the preparation of teachers so that they are equipped for work in places that are relatively unfamiliar to many staff, whether this is with regard to inner city areas or small remote rural communities (White & Downey 2021; Johannessen et al. 2010; Lauricella 2005). The rationale underpinning these schemes, primarily introduced into teacher education programmes, has been to help pre-service and early career teachers to engage with humility and open-minds. A fundamental challenge is fostering engagement with such communities, without such newcomers adopting a patronising veil of pity and instead, supporting them in developing ‘counternarratives of hope’ in their practice (Azano and Biddle 2019, 6). Walking the community is a creative intervention deployed to introduce teachers to unfamiliar neighbourhoods (Johannessen et al. 2010), whereby they undertake walking by themselves or with a local person, who serves as a guide or fellow explorer. It is the preconceived attitudes and mindsets that individuals bring with them that are problematised by time spent in the community, as new thinking and perspectives are

inculcated. Some such programmes devised by teacher education providers incorporate activities that the walkers prepare beforehand alongside additional tasks, undertaken in the field, that ‘help to foster positive attitudinal changes, and dispel some inaccurate assumptions about life and work of a place and its people’ (Downey 2012).

We term the process of reflecting that we undertook while mobile across a community site ‘walking-creating’, as this opened up participants’ disclosures. These reflective moments shed light on ‘revelations’ encountered within or without the classroom that helped shift prior orientations held by some early career teachers towards their placement community. Taking educators away from the school campus invariably allows for a sense of freedom from the hurly burly of the teaching day and provides opportunities to find spaces that are ‘fresher [with] less controlled conditions’ (Langford and Crawford 2022, 2).

Walking applied in its most basic format, for research purposes, involves collecting information from participants and from the environment for subsequent analyses. Employed as a mobile data collection method, it can range from a structured staged walk at one end of the scale, to a flexible excursion at the other, during which questions are set by researchers and answered by participants (Kinney 2017, 3). Mobile forms of data and information gathering about a town or settlement, similar to preparatory activities in some teacher education programmes, can be supplemented through the use of a plethora of complementary contemporary technologies (e.g. GIS, video, photography), which offer affordances, such as: detailed geographic information, i.e., spatial and place-specific data; opportunities to record, using multi-media, conversations held in situ; and the potential for disrupting conventional power relations observed in sedentary encounters between the researcher and researched (Finlay and Bowman 2017). Our walking-creating involved adopting a docent method in that it was

participant-led, with there being audio recording of the conversation and special sites of interest selected by the participants being visited (Chang 2017). We aimed to achieve a sense of sociability while walking and talking together so as to encourage participants to disclose personal narratives.

Educators being sensitive to their community is more than the application of common sense or a practical way to build links between themselves, the school and families in the neighbourhood. For, as Lauricella (2005, 125) pointed out, at a deeper level, ‘the rhetoric of despair’ that stigmatises certain peripheral communities can be challenged during the walk, specifically when the teachers are calling on all their ‘available senses’. It is contended that active walking while interviewing, rather than sedentary interviewing, is likely to bring participants to reflect on their preconceived ideas and articulate how their ways of thinking are shifting. This is because physicality promotes deep reflection as ‘walkers’ bodies bring with them their own politics, cultures, histories, habitual responses and lived experiences’ (Macpherson 2016, 426), which are indivisible from the emergent teacher identity (Corbett 2021). The aim of our walking-creating was to elicit whether and if so, the extent to which, novice educators were sensitive to the communities into which they had been placed and hence, had begun to question the deficit discourses adhering to such peripheral places and potentially, were creating hopeful narratives (Azano and Biddle 2019, 6).

The walking creating journey sought to prompt participants to disclose how their awareness had developed when they had stepped outside of the school gates in their placement communities. During a one to one walking-creating journey, the first author and the novice visited significant places chosen by the latter on the basis that they felt their chosen sites of interest were relevant to their teaching in-place and as it emerged during the process, places which facilitated novel disclosures about learning about their

community. For this small research study, we initially proposed holding journeys with approximately six early career teachers. The aim was to recruit participants who had time and interest in sharing reflections on how they had come to understand their different placement communities. However, as each outdoor event was subject to the vagaries of the weather as well as the day to day commitments of teachers, only two walking-creating journeys were held. The walking-creating journey that is reported in this case study is selected due to its length and richness of content. The pseudonym Abi was adopted by the participant to protect her identity. The event lasted approximately 90 minutes and was scheduled after the end of the school day, when Abi was free from her teaching and pastoral responsibilities. Once the walking-creating event came to an end and we had returned from the journey, the audio recordings could be processed, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. Analytical codes were informed by the drivers central to the generative theory elucidated above. To respect the mobile element of our walking-creating, narrative data are presented below according to the sites visited. This case study contributes new understanding of the salience of early career teachers engaging with their rural community. However, as generative lens advocates contend, each community and hence, the experiences of each early career teacher will be specific. Consequently, we make no claims to generalisability of our outcomes to other contexts.

The volunteer early career teachers who we recruited to walking-creating activities were in the field on clinical experience. That is, they were on placement in secondary schools, (pupils aged 11 to 16 years), located in the South West Peninsular of England. Our participants were new to the region, having only been there three months and consequently were only just becoming familiar with their school and its

neighbourhood. Below, we present some of the narrative account offered by Abi, one of the two early career teacher participants in the study, who the first author accompanied for walking-creating. Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Ethics Committee at the School of Education, Bath Spa University, UK.

Walking-creating findings

Below, we present a case study comprising conversations that took place with Abi at her chosen sites of interest around the community, where she was on clinical placement. We focus on three narratives that highlight moments through which she disclosed what she had learnt about the community and this reveals evidence of her opinions forming in certain new ways, perhaps as hopeful discourses that would feed into her practice (Azano and Biddle 2019). We present these interludes as postcards sent back from the encounters at three significant sites. While we do not aim to offer hard and fast links with extant framings of communities in peripheral places, in our subsequent discussion we use the ideas of generative theory (Balfour et al., 2008) in order to give context to the commentary made by Abi.

Postcard 1: The massive festival

Every year there is a massive festival to celebrate the invention of They come here to this park from all around the country. I loved it because it really showed a real pride in the town and also, it's, kind of, heritage, I think. They're very, very passionate about celebrating that. I had a lovely day, and I now realise it was really important. Students could see that I was in their community, and I understood their community and I was celebrating their community with them.

This postcard reports on Abi's first site of interest. She took the lead on our journey and as we set out, directed us toward a public park, where we sat for a while on a bench looking over an unkept open green field: the grounds on which the annual town festival

is held. She took time to reflect and comment on the industrial heritage that was enthusiastically celebrated by the residents.

Postcard 2: Pickled in the past

The place is pickled with its past like it is everywhere. And that mining past didn't end that long ago, and that's why you can still see the repercussions of it in the people that live here. It used to be a very prosperous place, where going into the mines was a career choice that quite a lot of people chose living in that area. Then, it just all stopped, and so you've now got these coming generations who are still surrounded by the history of what was a prosperous time, but they have no way to access it anymore. They need to find another way. They need to find another thing to do with themselves, but it's so interesting that it's constantly just there. It surrounds you.

After visiting the park, Abi walked to another site. The road that we had been following abruptly ended, and we climbed a slope and looked across rough moorland that reached down to the coast in the distance. Expanding on the theme of the local history, the second postcard presents Abi's reflections on how she felt the past permeated the present day. She said that she wanted to visit this site, because there was nothing much to see except for the crumbling remains of some long-departed industries: that was the point she was making.

Postcard 3: Five miles

There are some students that haven't ever really gone to the beach, which is five miles... I definitely know it's under five miles over there and there are students, I am told, that have never been to there. There are students that have never been to the international XXX, which is just up the road. But then, there is like hugely successful people and very happy people that choose to live in the community as well, because they love the community and because of its location and house prices. That's something I'm really working on, actually. I think trying to

understand who my students are and what they want and how far they can go, is really important for me.

The final postcard recalls the conversation that we held at the top of the hill from where we could see the sea and beach in the distance. The strong wind was whipping up the waves and we could easily make out the white lines of breakers smashing into the coast. This site was of interest to Abi, because even though the coastline was a main attraction, known for drawing tourists to the region, the beach was an example of contested lifestyles, with conflicting views regarding its worth.

Discussion

Investigating the community outside the immediate grounds of the placement school appears to have had significant positive impacts on the development of this early career teacher. The key points that this participant reflected upon demonstrate the ever changing nature of her community and in general, that the periphery is a complex place for early career teachers to enter. The short illustrative postcards assist in contextualising her emergent understandings. While the focus of the early career teacher's conversation is on people, namely, the families and students with whom she works, consideration of generative drivers assists in surfacing the major factors tending to impact on everyday life in small peripheral towns, such as the one in which Abi has been placed for the teaching practicum.

The first site of interest encouraged Abi to explain that she had made a special effort to attend the annual town festival held recently over a weekend and how much it had taught her, despite her having had no prior interest in the famous historical inventions and having treated the topic as a rather niche hobby of little significance. She had come to acknowledge that the town had a rich heritage, for in earlier centuries, it had been known for its cutting edge technologies. Abi appeared to be surprised at how

much local pride there was concerning this history, because in comparison, the town currently offered nothing much: ‘in the main high street you have a real mix of shops, like open ones, empty ones, charity shops, pubs’. The forces impacting on the region in historic times are highlighted in the evident wealth that was amassed from its former position as an industrial centre of national and international trade in mineral exports. What is currently a remote left-behind Peninsula had once been a major centre of technology, but forces such as globalisation and mass industrialisation, have resulted, to put it simply, in only the heritage festival remaining to mark the riches of the past.

The second postcard indicates ways in which Abi had come to realise, over time, that the local towns and villages’ communities maintained a sense of pride and prestige. This was in the face of the far reaching economic and industrial changes that result in some places now being stigmatised as peripheral. While there was a risk of Abi succumbing to the lures of ‘golden ageism’ when looking back, it was essential that she recognised that there had been a communal way of life cemented by the grinding hardship demanded by the industry, and that this pride is something her current students could call upon in building their own futures. The ruins pictured in this postcard were the stimulus for Abi to disclose her feelings. The contradiction she felt most strongly was, as she put it, for her students to be living in the shadows of the ruins, while their generation was needing to ‘find another way’. She was aware they needed to figure out life trajectories and to draw on the past in such a way as to resonate with a phoenix rising from the ruins. Notably Abi’s reflections indicate that she had become keenly aware of the current socioeconomic landscape in which she was located as well as the long-standing community identities that she needed to navigate. Her sensitivity towards the community had developed, according to Abi, in that by giving up her time to go to the festival, she had ‘stepped over a barrier’ that had been holding her back from

relating to the students. With respect to what had happened at the festival, those families who had observed her participate, had, in turn, seen her show respect towards a cultural event that remained important to them: she was developing her responsibility for recognising what mattered to the local population.

A hopeful note regarding students' future lives was expressed by Abi in her further disclosures. Her awareness of the rural-urban divide was delightfully revealed when she broached the matter of student aspirations, saying: 'I wonder if there was a student wanting to go into farming here who had a conversation with a student in Birmingham about what they wanted to do, what perception that inner city kid would have of going into farming as a career choice?'. In answer to her own query, she retorted: 'I wouldn't accept anybody looking down on a student whose career choice is to go into farming, because, well actually, there are huge amounts of skills that that student needs and we'll support them to make sure they can get those'. Rather than complying with a particular urban view of aspirational career choices and appropriate futures, through her disclosures Abi was adopting a place-aware criticality (White, 2008). Moreover, her orientation toward what she wanted to achieve for the community's students can be described as originating in hope, rather than contributing to oppression (Azano and Biddle 2019). In keeping with this, Abi's placement school and its staff featured as an essential generative resource and socially oriented service deeply embedded in the neighbourhood: potentially facilitating individual student agency and encouraging families to realise ambitions for their children.

The final postcard reports our conversation about a matter of divided opinions: the beach. Abi showed her frustration that some students had never experienced the beach, which she clearly loved and reportedly visited frequently after school hours. Her view regarding the lifestyle and quality experiences associated with the beach was

confirmed by newcomers, who Abi claimed were being drawn to the area to enjoy the sea and benefit from affordable housing. However, her ‘taken for granted’ view remained in conflict with some local families, who reportedly take a different stance. For, there are apparently those for whom the sea and its possibilities do not enter into their thinking. The reasoning for this attitude was not entirely explicable according to Abi, but she hypothesised that it could be matter of the beach just being everyday and not worth bothering with. Further to this, she noted that even though the tourism that the coastline attracts was providing minimal earnings for locals, this seasonal trade was not a reasonable equivalent for the former mining-based industry, the memory of which community members treasured.

Toward the end of our walking-creating event, it was apparent that the deep learning (Downey 2021) necessary for empowering place-consciousness in Abi’s practice remained a significant challenge. In sum, while she had experienced certain events and places and had moved on in her understanding of the students and families, Abi confessed that she continued to work hard to overcome her own preconceived ideas regarding what was the ‘right thing’ for local families to be doing for the children who she taught in school. She admitted it was difficult not to be ‘putting my own ideas on them too heavily’. This was specifically in relation to enriching experiences that parents failed to deliver and the paucity of which remained difficult for her to comprehend.

Concluding remarks

The case study presented in this paper reveals the practical application of a creative approach to fostering reflective learning by teachers. Accompanying the early career teacher around the landscape allowed her to voice what she had been figuring out about the community and how she was responding to the

complexities of her placement in the context of the local neighbourhood: past and present. The opportunity for making disclosures prompted her honesty about the struggles she faced in her classroom and in achieving place-aware practices.

While seeking to promote hopeful positivity in the face of taken for granted deficit narratives about certain communities, it appears that early career teachers can encounter alternative mindsets and lifestyles that are both troubling and difficult to come to terms with. Developmental mentoring and supervision have an important role to play in managing such issues.

In peripheral schools and regions, the issues of the recruitment of early career and retention of established teachers remain significant policy challenges with consequences felt at the local school level. A practical and potentially very successful response can be for teachers to take time out of the classroom and to get to know the place: the families with whom they are working and whose children they are teaching. This can help motivate connection with the school and help find purpose within the community. While superficial acquaintance might result in some degree of familiarity, what is needed in communities such as the one explored in the above example, is activities that enable educators' ongoing professional development in terms of engaging with the multiple drivers that coalesce in-place. Walking-creating activities involving deep thinking facilitated by mobile reflective conversations are effective in peripheral places. They can be adopted in other locations where an educator is inserted into unfamiliar social and physical environments and is seeking understanding.

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