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“PLEASE HELP ME FIND TEACHERS FOR MY RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOL”: A MODEL FOR TEACHING READINESS

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining teachers in regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities has long been highlighted as problematic in Australia. With predicted growth in classrooms across the nation, it is expected that there will be increased teacher shortages in RRR communities. Specific, contextual preparation for teaching has been advocated for preservice teachers through a flexible tertiary education curriculum linked to RRR professional experiences. This current case study involves a school-university collaboration commencing after a school principal in Queensland was unable to attract teachers to his RRR school. This qualitative research aimed to explore self-reported learning experiences and outcomes of five preservice teachers focused on community, school and classroom in an RRR school. Data were gathered using in-depth semi-structured interviews, which were analysed and discussed under three categories: community, school, and classroom. Findings indicated that the preservice teachers gained usable knowledge about the community, understanding the role of community and connecting with the community as a teacher in RRR contexts. They learned the significance of the connection between the school and the community, the importance of the teachers' relationships in supporting the students, and the role of parents and carers in the school. Finally, the preservice teachers reported they learnt about pedagogical knowledge practices (e.g., planning, classroom management, and assessment), building relationships with students, differentiated instruction, supporting diversity, and teaching Indigenous students. This case study presents a cost-effective measure for ensuring RRR schools are adequately staffed while facilitating preservice teachers' achievements of the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching.

Keywords: Rural, remote, staffing, preservice teachers, mentoring

Introduction

For many years there has been a shortage of quality teachers in geographically isolated areas of Australia (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Reid, White, Green, Lock, Cooper, & Hastings, 2012; Roberts, 2005; Trinidad, Sharpin, Ledger & Broadley, 2014; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). The Commonwealth Government's *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education* confirms the need to attract and retain teachers and school leaders in RRR communities to ensure school students receive the “best possible start to their education” (Halsey, 2018, p. 5). Students living in RRR areas deserve high-quality education equivalent to students in urban areas; however, student outcomes are lagging for those living in rural and remote communities (Sullivan, McConney, & Perry, 2018). There are various state government

incentives for teachers to teach in geographically isolated locations such as extended holidays, payment of removal costs, additional funding, short-term teaching appointments, transfer points for harder to staff schools, and fast-tracked promotion opportunities. Nevertheless, these incentives appear to fall short in overcoming the lack of teachers in RRR areas (Halsey, 2018). With the purported demand for teachers on the rise (Weldon, 2015), it is expected that teacher shortages will become exacerbated in RRR communities. The purpose of this paper is to present a way to recruit teachers into RRR schools.

Preparing Preservice Teachers

Research indicates that beginning teachers who accept teaching positions in geographically isolated locations may experience feelings of loneliness, burnout, homesickness, cultural differences, professional isolation and a lack of ongoing support through professional development (Lock, Budgen, Lunay, & Oakley, 2012; O'Brien, Goodard, & Keeffe, 2008; Reid et al., 2012; Yarrow et al., 1999). It is purported that more effective tertiary preparation of preservice teachers involving living and working in RRR communities may assist in addressing the much needed teaching positions and reducing early-career teacher attrition (Halsey, 2018). Initiatives that encourage preservice teachers to experience regional, and in particular, rural and remote professional experiences are not new across Australia. Many departments of education support RRR professional experiences through funded programs. For example, in the past, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2014) offered short-term RRR school visits through "Beyond the Line" and more recently offered scholarship programs to support preservice teachers to undertake a RRR placement. In a similar response, the Queensland Government offered professional experience grants through the "Beyond the Range" program targeting high-priority state schools in the regions of Central Queensland, Darling Downs-South West, Far North Queensland and North Queensland (Queensland Department of Education, 2018). Through these RRR preparation experiences, it was hoped that upon graduation preservice teachers could make informed decisions about employment in RRR schools.

Initial teacher education (ITE) providers are aware of the importance of preparing preservice teachers for teaching in all contexts, including RRR schools. Projects such as "Over the Hill" (Hudson & Hudson, 2009) demonstrated how a short-term RRR professional experience, provided through a school-university collaboration, could prepare preservice teachers and change the attitudes for teaching in geographically isolated areas. The preservice teachers involved in such projects indicated they experienced a strong sense of community, multi-age classroom teaching, a deeper understanding of teaching in RRR areas, networking with experienced teachers, and engagement in educational conversations appropriate to RRR schools, which presented new levels of awareness. "Over the Hill" was successful as it extended the participants' knowledge about teaching in RRR contexts with the majority of the preservice teachers prepared to accept a teaching position in such a location (Hudson & Hudson, 2008).

University-initiated projects have sought to provide resources and encourage preservice teacher preparation for teaching in RRR locations. For instance, the *Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum* (RRRTEC; White, Kline, Hastings, & Lock, 2012) provides quality resources for preparing preservice teachers and supporting beginning teachers in RRR contexts. The generated resources (see <http://www.rrrtec.net.au/>) were developed in response to an extensive literature review, preservice teacher surveys ($n=263$), and in-depth interviews with teacher educators ($n= 20$) across Australia (White & Kline, 2012). The research uncovered the need to prepare preservice teachers to "not only be classroom ready but also school and community ready" (p. 36), which includes RRR locations.

The focus of professional experience is often on classroom preparation, yet, White and Kline (2012) highlight that for teachers to be effective they require an understanding of the community, the school, and the classroom. This is particularly the case with teaching in RRR

contexts as many preservice and in-service teachers may be from urban areas and have little understanding about the meaning of rurality, the role and identity of teachers working in RRR contexts, teaching RRR students, and the importance placed upon the connectedness between communities and schools. In the development of their resources, White et al. (2012) outlined a conceptual framework of community readiness, school readiness and classroom readiness by exploring pertinent resources, such as: Experiencing rurality; Community identities; Whole school focus; Student learning in the classroom; Professional experience; and, Information for working in RRR settings. The resources were designed to support teacher educators, principals, mentors, and early-career teachers working in RRR communities.

In a comparable response to White et al. (2012), four Western Australian university educators from four universities formed the *Tertiary Educators Rural, Regional and Remote Network* (TERRR Network). A key purpose of the TERRR Network was to develop the capacity of universities, through a community of practice approach, to prepare teachers for teaching in geographically isolated locations (Trinidad et al., 2014). The research was implemented through five phases that included: an analysis of literature to determine RRR curricula; an action plan for developing curricula aligned to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2011); collecting data from 164 preservice teachers who trialled the development of an online course about teaching in RRR locations; mapping the RRR professional experiences of 44 preservice teachers across the four universities; and discussion and reflection about the RRR experience. Each phase of the project was underpinned by research with a community of practice approach, which supported the sustainability of the project. As a result of the project, Trinidad et al. concluded that preparing preservice teachers to teach in RRR locations will require “*a multi-pronged approach to curricula development, professional practicums, field experiences and content specific strategies for teaching in rural and remote locations is recommended*” (p. 9).

The Context for this Study

Similar to the findings noted in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (Halsey, 2018), a primary school principal from an RRR school in Queensland was experiencing difficulties attracting staff for his school. As a way forward, he contacted the School of Education (SoE) at a regional university in the hope that a collaborative program could be developed to entice teacher graduates to accept teaching positions at his school. In consultation with the SoE Director of Professional Experience, the literature was reviewed to gather information about past successful RRR programs. As a way forward, a sponsored professional experience at the principal’s remote school would be offered to preservice teachers completing a four-year Bachelor or Education Program (primary). During this placement the role of the preservice teachers would be to work alongside their allocated mentor teacher building up to full days of teaching and gaining experience in the teach, assess, evaluate cycle. The preservice teachers would be expected to conduct themselves as teachers attending staff meetings, playground duty and working with specialist staff to support the students in the classroom and school. Similar to past RRR projects outcomes, it was hoped that this experience would prepare the preservice teachers to consider teaching at a remote school upon graduation.

An email calling for expressions of interest was circulated to all preservice teachers from the three campuses of the university who were in their third or final year of their primary teaching degree. As part of the email, the principal provided information about the school, so the preservice teachers were aware of the context before they submitted their applications. The following is an outline of the school context as presented by the principal:

Our school has 215 students, of which, 38% are indigenous, 10% have a verified disability through the Department of Education guidelines but a further 15% have a disability that requires some form of adjustment in the classroom, 70% of our students are in the lowest 25% of socio-economic status in the state. The nearest Special School is 150 km away which means that about 6 of our

students have very high disability needs and access a completely individualised curriculum. All of our kids are fantastic, even the challenging ones. We have 10 classroom teachers and a Head of Curriculum, a Head of Pedagogy, A Head of Special Education, a Support Teacher for Literacy and Numeracy, two specialist teachers and myself. All classes from Prep to Year 4 have a full time Teacher's Aide. Year 5, 5/6 and Year 6 have about ten hours of aide time each week.

Preservice teachers were selected through an application process that included writing a response as to why they wanted to participate in an RRR professional experience. Their Grade Point Average (GPA) and their previous professional experience reports were reviewed. Additionally, as part of the application process, the preservice teachers were also required to be part of the associated research project. Twenty-two preservice teachers applied, however, five preservice teachers who had the strongest applications and met the criteria were selected. The five selected preservice teachers were provided funds sourced through a university scholarship given by an outside body (\$2000 between five preserve teachers to assist with airfares) and accommodation was located and funded by the school. The school also provided staple food items (e.g., milk, bread, cereal) while the university covered the usual mentor payment arrangements. The funding for airfares, accommodation and some food items was in response to research that highlighted preservice teachers can be reluctant to apply for RRR professional experiences as they can be paying rent or need to work after school and weekends to support themselves (Beutel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011; Halsey, 2005). Preservice teachers at the application stage were made aware that while this program provided basic financial support (airfares, accommodation, and food items) participants were required to fund additional food supplies (e.g., lunch and dinner) and personal items.

Table 1 summarises the backgrounds of the five selected participants, their gender, year level of their degree, the number of days of their placement and reasons for applying. A pseudonym has been assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity and to comply with the approved ethics applications. At this RRR school, four of the preservice teachers were completing their second placement in the third year of their program (25 days) while one preservice teacher was completing her final professional experience in the fourth year of her program (30 days).

Participants' ages ranged from 20-26 years. None of the preservice teachers had completed a remote professional experience previously, although two had completed professional experiences in regional locations near one university campus in northern New South Wales (NSW). There were some similarities in the preservice teachers' reasons for applying such as wanting to gain experience teaching in a remote school. Carissa sought a "*different professional experience*" and Simone wanted to experience "*teaching Indigenous students*"; all were seeking to learn about teaching in an RRR setting.

At this university, preparation for teaching in RRR locations is embedded in the professional experience units. The topic of RRR teaching is presented in a broad sense and the preservice teachers selected for this program were provided with more specific information about their allocated school context, community, and the students in their classes. To prepare the preservice teachers for this professional experience, the Director of Professional Experience (university) and the school principal decided that allocating selected participants early in the semester may facilitate communication via email and phone with their mentor teachers and the principal to prepare for teaching in this remote school. The communication between the mentor, principal and preservice teachers continued for three months leading up to the professional experience placement. Once the preservice teachers arrived at the school, they were orientated to the context by the principal and supported during their placement by their allocated mentor teacher and university adviser. The university adviser was on site initially for ensuring all preservice teachers were supported with further guidance through email, phone or Zoom meetings to discuss issues, troubleshoot and generally advise them as they completed their professional experience in this RRR school.

Table 1: Information about the participants and their reasons for applying

Name	Age	Gender	Professional experience	Reason for applying
Laura	20	F	Third year 25 days of teaching	I am wishing to explore if I could teach in a remote school when I graduate. I think completing this professional experience will be good preparation. I haven't really been away from home before so I think this will be an excellent learning experience.
Carissa	20	F	Third year 25 days of teaching	I really want to have a different professional experience. When I read the demographics of the school I could see it was different to my previous placements. I think I will learn a lot from this experience.
Jesinta	21	F	Third year 25 days of teaching	I have always wanted to experience teaching in a remote school. I am very keen to learn from this experience and challenge myself by being away from home. I like the idea of the support from my peers as we experience this together.
Brent	24	M	Third year 25 days of teaching	I am in the army reserve and would love the opportunity to be involved in a remote professional experience, as I believe this is where I would like to be upon graduation.
Simone	26	F	Fourth year 30 days of teaching	I would like to gain more experience in teaching Indigenous students. I would like to teach in an Indigenous community when I graduate but I don't have a lot of experience.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

White et al. (2012) outlined three constructs for teaching readiness for RRR schools (i.e., community, school, and classroom). This qualitative research aimed to explore self-reported learning experiences and outcomes of five preservice teachers focused on community, school and classroom readiness as a result of their professional experience in an RRR school. The two stages (experience and reflection) of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory forms part of the theoretical framework for this study. Kolb draws on the work of Dewey incorporating hands-on discovery learning for developing teacher knowledge and skills. Models of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) including professional/field experiences have utilised Kolb's experiential learning theory when experience is undertaken in the real-world context so learning can be applied and confirmed (e.g., see Stirling, Kerr, Banwell, McPherson, & Heron, 2016). Kolb, Boyatzis, and Mainemelis (2001) posit that "*learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience*" (p. 227). Kolb noted that learning occurs when individuals observe and interact with their environment and, through these first-hand experiences, construct new knowledge and understanding. Constructivism provides a lens for the investigation as "*most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered*" (Stake, 1995, p. 99). Applying newly acquired knowledge can facilitate further understandings (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Bandura's (1997) vicarious and mastery experiences provide an additional framework for preservice teacher learning, as they observe others in their work and gather experiences in teaching towards building mastery experiences.

This ethically approved investigation was a small-scale interpretive study (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018), as it examined the self-reported experiences of five preservice teachers engaged in RRR professional experiences. A case study method was deemed suitable for this investigation

as there were insufficient numbers to conduct a quantitative study; furthermore, it allowed the researchers to investigate real-world experiences of these preservice teachers within a specific geographical area, providing “multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented” (Stake, 1995, p. 108).

Data were collected through 40-50 minute semi-structured interviews from the five preservice teachers, which allowed for the inclusion of prompts or probes to gain further clarification about the preservice teachers’ experiences and learning (Edwards & Holland, 2013). As a recall technique (Morse, 2015), the interviews were conducted within a week of completing their RRR professional experiences. Interviews were transcribed and de-identified to ensure participant anonymity. The following interview questions were asked of the five mentees: Was there support from the community? If yes, give examples. What did you learn personally from this experience? What did you learn professionally? What did you learn about rural and remote communities? What did you learn about the school? What did you learn about the role of the teacher? What did you learn about teaching in an RRR classroom?

White et al. (2012) and Reid et al. (2012) suggest that to be prepared for teaching in RRR communities, teachers must be community ready, school ready and classroom ready. Thus, the interview data were hand-coded and analysed into the three constructs: community, school and classroom, as it allowed the researchers to categorise data more effectively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Responses where more than one construct was presented were separated to ensure the corresponding answers were placed in the assigned construct.

Findings and Discussion

The interview questions related specifically to the preservice teachers learning in an RRR context. The findings were analysed under the three constructs (community, school and classroom) with various subheadings used to further separate data.

Community

Supportive community. All five preservice teachers made comments about the supportive nature of the community in this remote town. Laura commented that the “community was warm and friendly” and you could tell “they were keen to ensure we had a good time”. Jesinta noted that although they were geographically isolated, there was plenty to do and “the community was supportive and always asking after us to see if there was anything we needed. They invited us for meals and made sure we were not going to be hungry”. Carissa commented that the people in the community “went above and beyond to ensure we had a good time and were supported”. Simone’s comments confirmed the statements of her peers, saying “people always told me about small town communities; they welcomed us with open arms and by the end of the six weeks it felt like we were locals”.

Community history, pride and activities. Brent was interested in the heritage of the town and commented, “I was surprised by the amount of history in the town. There are lots of grand buildings, the architecture is grand”. He was also surprised how the “people in the town were so proud of their history, I have never seen that before”. He commented that he had always lived in “metropolitan areas” and had never heard “people speak proudly about their heritage. It was something new and I enjoyed hearing the stories”. As well as being pleasantly surprised by the community pride in their heritage, Brent, Laura and Carissa were also surprised by the social activities. Laura noted, “I was worried about what I was going to do there. My social life had never been so good. I was invited to dinners, sporting activities and even the races”. Brent also commented “I love sport and there was plenty of sport in the town. It was great I was invited to participate”. Carissa agreed when she stated, “being there I played footy, netball, basketball and hockey. I can’t believe there was so much to do”. However, Carissa also recognised the need to be

professional in an RRR community; that is to “keep aware of your behaviour too - one or two social drinks – don’t make gossip!!”

The importance of community. All preservice teachers commented on the importance of community in a remote teaching context. Carissa revealed that getting to know the community and the parents/carers meant she “had a better understanding about all the students in her class, particularly the Indigenous students”. Jesinta stated, “I never realised the importance of the community in relation to the connection with the school before. The whole community seemed to have a vested interest in the school and what happens there”. Simone agreed that “community support in a remote location was important as the school seemed to be at the hub of the community”. Finally, Brent offered advice to preservice teachers and teachers working in a remote community:

This experience has shown me how important the connection with the community is when you are in a remote town. For teachers, it provides an understanding of the context of the school and gives insight into the students in your classrooms. It is therefore important to be a part of the community, get involved as much as possible.

Brent also commented on the value of accepting people from all backgrounds, “you need to keep an open attitude when you meet people in the community as they each have a story that helps you learn about the culture of the town”.

School-community links. The community was considered by participants as inextricably linked to the school, particularly for understanding local resources and the school students’ backgrounds. As evident in previous studies, by understanding the community the preservice teachers gained an insight into the backgrounds of the students (see also Hudson & Hudson, 2009; Kline, White, & Lock, 2013). The principal and teachers were involved in connecting the preservice teachers to the community (e.g., hosting a school-community welcoming barbecue; after school connections). Brent acknowledged the holistic support provided by the school and community: “Amazing, brilliant support!!! Everywhere and everyone from the principal, who constantly sought us out to see how we were going, to the local café owner!”

As a result of holistic inclusion, the participants considered the community supportive, caring, and welcoming. It was also recognised that the community presented opportunities to learn about its history, especially with the various buildings and artefacts available throughout the township. The community provided opportunities for involvement in activities, such as sports, which helped to facilitate positive community relationships. Participants acknowledged that being open-minded about people in the community can assist further understandings about the community culture. Indeed, it appeared that this professional experience provided the preservice teachers with an understanding about what it means to teach in a rural and remote community. Understanding ‘rurality’ is one of the reasons that teachers may find it challenging teaching in such contexts (Country Education Project, 2010; Handal, Watson, Petocz, & Maher, 2013; Haynes & Miller, 2016; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Lock et al., 2011; Young & Kennedy, 2011), however, for these preservice teachers they gained an understanding of the importance of community prior to graduation.

School

School community. The preservice teachers spoke highly about the school and their school experiences. Simone commented on the enthusiasm of the staff, “The school community was one of the best school communities I have ever been a part of. The staff are young and fresh and full of motivation”. Jesinta’s comments were similar when she said, “I could not speak more highly about the school. Every teacher was welcoming and willing to assist, listen and give advice”. She also noted that the teachers were “enthusiastic to have prac students” and treated them as professionals. Jesinta stated that they received advice and feedback from “all the teachers and

not just their allocated mentor”. She remarked that the preservice teachers’ *“ideas and conversations were valued”*, which made them feel part of the school. From Carissa’s perspective, the culture of the school and the teachers’ willingness to help came from the *“awesome principal and leadership in the school, where nothing was too much trouble and every question was answered and comments appreciated”*.

Roles of parent and carers. As well as acknowledging the important role of the teachers, Brent emphasised the role of parents and carers in the school. He noted that their pride in the school was modelled for the students through specific school activities. For example, Brent mentioned, *“A strong P & C allowed parents and carers to take an interest and pride in the school, which flowed onto the students”*. Parents and carers provided assistance and *“their willingness to help in all aspects of the school meant additional activities at the school ran efficiently i.e. tuckshop, school fun days, NAIDOC Day”*. Yet, just as the parents and carers supported the school, Carissa felt the teachers supported the parents and this was different to her other experiences:

In a rural setting a teacher plays a lot more roles than in a metropolitan setting. They are there to support not only the students but often the parents too. Some of the parents would seek advice from the teachers and the parents would respect the advice received. I was so impressed with how the teachers’ care extended to the parents/carers.

Laura highlighted that there was a whole school focus in supporting the students and the school. She acknowledged the school decision-making process when linking the community to the school, to illustrate:

What does this community need from us? The staff meetings were ALWAYS focussed on the needs of the whole community. Decisions were made and ideas adapted to meet the community needs. This is different from my previously experiences where teachers and schools made decisions and then told the community.

Simone remarked favourably on the connection between the school and community. She stated that *“The school and community worked together constantly. The teachers supported the community and the community supported the teachers. They had a shared vision”*. Brent said that:

The closeness of the community was apparent in everything. For example, there was an Indigenous Teacher’s Aide – Uncle Kenny. He is also an elder in the Indigenous community. Every kid respected him and listened to him. It was incredible to see. The way he talked to them was brilliant.

Positive relationships between and with the staff. As well as the positive relationships between the teachers and the parents/carers, Brent observed that there were *“positive relationships between the teachers”*. Simone commented that she had never *“been in a school before where the staff were so incredibly connected with each other and had the students’ wellbeing at the centre of everything they did”*. Carissa confirmed that all the teachers *“were all on the same page, to support the kids”*. Laura identified the talents and dedication of the staff when she stated, *“It was evident to me that each staff member at the school was a passionate teacher who was working extra hard to achieve the best for their students. A lot of the teachers were younger but exceptional teachers”*.

The preservice teachers recognised that the leaders and teachers were significant in making them feel accepted within the school. Ensuring support and acceptance for teachers in RRR communities can help to overcome feelings of personal and professional isolation (Country Education Project, 2010; Kline & Walker- Gibbs, 2015; Lock et al., 2012; Sharplin, 2014; Young & Kennedy, 2011). The teaching staff were considered to be enthusiastic, welcoming and willing to assist the preservice teachers; and this level of collegiality and support helped the preservice teachers develop a sense of belonging. Belonging is identified as important for living and

teaching in RRR communities given the context may be different from previous experiences. (White et al., 2009). The participants felt they were treated as professionals, which was endorsed by the principal and leadership team. Indeed, the support, communication and guidance required for effective mentoring and collegiality was evident in the preservice teacher interview data. Such mentoring practices are recognised to assist new teachers transition to teaching in RRR contexts (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

The preservice teachers were guided by staff through interactions and staff meetings to acknowledge and understand the role the community played within the school, including organising and supporting specific school activities, supporting the teachers' work in the classroom, and community members working at the school for enhancing student education. The shared vision between the school and community, where both teachers and community members supported each other, allowed the preservice teachers to develop understandings about the interconnectedness between school and community in RRR contexts. This preparation for teaching is vital as school-community relations are inextricably linked in RRR settings (Downes & Roberts, 2018).

Classroom

Schedules and routines. The preservice teachers commented on how much they learned about their classes and teaching due the diverse nature of the school and classrooms. Brent explained his learning for teaching focussed on understanding the importance of being consistent and the importance of following routines.

Routine and ensuring students understand their daily schedule, especially for the ASD students in the class; giving choices for students that are consistently being addressed for behavioural issues so the student feels in control and, varying the tone of my voice so I keep the teaching interesting. I also learned about the importance of keeping calm which flowed to the students.

Diversity and differentiation. While the preservice teachers had studied differentiation strategies at university and enacted approaches in a previous placement, these preservice teachers indicated their learning about diversity and differentiation was enhanced by this placement because “the students had diverse learning needs, diverse personalities and diverse backgrounds”. Carissa commented that “every single child in every single classroom is different in some way. I learned that their home life and prior life experiences will have a massive effect on their learning and how they behave”. Laura emphasised that she learned “a great deal” about differentiation because of the diversity in her class. She presented this diversity as follows:

Well, there were 29 students in this Year 6 class. Around half were indigenous. Also, out of the 29, 13 were Special Needs kids and 4 with Asperger's syndrome. With the others, the standard of achievement ranged from Grade 2 to Grade 6 and only one boy was operating at a higher level. So, you can imagine that the differentiation needs were massive. I learned so much from this experience.

Simone confirmed the learning she gained about student diversity for advancing her teaching:

I learned about acknowledging the diversity of the student backgrounds and really getting to know the student, their home life and their daily experiences enabled me to understand their behaviour, emotions and responses to learning. Once I implemented this new approach into my practice, I was able to shape my teaching to suit individual needs.

The preservice teachers stressed the importance of “taking time for the planning of differentiation and connecting learning to the interests of the students”. Jesinta stated that the “biggest thing” she learnt was “that teaching is a process”. She observed that not all things will be “solved immediately” and no matter “how many textbooks you read and how many theories you

apply most often you need to use trial and error". Jesinta told an anecdote about a student who was responding to her management strategies over three weeks and then suddenly the student started to "ignore" her and there was "no connection", so she had to "problem solve about why the student felt like that" and she had to reflect on her "teaching to ensure it didn't happen again".

Behaviour management. The development of behaviour management skills was highlighted by three of the preservice teachers as a key learning experience. For instance, Simone commented on the practices of her mentor teacher and how she was supported for learning about behaviour management:

My behaviour management and implementation skills were developed over the six weeks. In my previous pracs my mentor teacher intervened but in this prac my mentor teacher supported me to do it myself. Consequently, I improved greatly over the six weeks.

Simone again referred to the "importance of the parents/carers" and how she worked with them for achieving positive behaviour management, which was "something I haven't experienced before". Carissa remarked that "building relationships with the kids ensured more effective behaviour management". Similarly, Brent commented that "building relationships and respect with year 5 was definitely the most important thing" he had learnt. "Most of the students had challenging backgrounds, so ensuring you built a relationship with the students, and working hand-in-hand in gaining respect with each of them". Laura confirmed the views of Carissa and Brent and noted, "Building relationships with kids quickly over the short period of time" was one of her "most important learnings" during this RRR professional experience.

Moderation of assessment. The preservice teachers were particularly excited that they had the opportunity to be involved in moderation with "other schools in the district". They had the opportunity to moderate the same student assessment task across the districts in rural Queensland. This involved the comparison of student performance on a summative assessment task. Grades were awarded and then compared with teacher judgements at other schools. While all five preservice teachers said they had not "experienced this before" in their previous placements, they all agreed they "learned a great deal about assessment". Specifically, Brent remarked that "it was really good to see how different teachers approach assessment for the same unit and topic. I enjoyed the teamwork".

Effective mentoring. The preservice teachers were assigned mentors, who they considered invaluable, particularly mentoring about behaviour management, day-to-day teaching, and moderation processes. While professional learning is identified as being limited for teachers in RRR communities (Jenkins, Taylor, & Reitano 2015), through effective mentoring these preservice teachers believed their learning was enhanced by this experience. They learnt about building positive teacher-student relationships and gaining respect, which required understandings about student diversity and differentiating the curriculum to support student learning. Learning about Indigenous backgrounds allowed for a relationship connectedness and provided ideas for more effective teaching practices. Importantly, teaching was recognised as a trial and error process for understanding differentiation.

There were many specific activities and practices that helped the preservice teachers become comfortable within the classroom, such as knowing the class and school routines, daily schedules, and giving students choices for particular behaviours. Overall, the leadership in the school facilitated a positive arrangement for inducting and mentoring preservice teachers within unique classroom contexts which is deemed to be a feature of retaining teachers in RRR schools (Downes & Roberts, 2018). Through this facilitation the connection between community, school and teaching in the classroom was apparent to these preservice teachers. To illustrate,

Relationships are critical for making the connections with the kids and the whole community. You have to work on that first before ever expecting trust or cooperation. I made sure that I went to all of the functions and got to know the families. I even had a beer at the pub with some of the family members. (Brent)

Understanding School, Community and Classroom

The reasons these preservice teachers engaged in this RRR experience were varied. However, at the conclusion of the professional experience, all participants wanted to teach in a RRR school as they had developed confidence and competence in their abilities to teach. For instance:

I also learned that I have a lot to learn before I could consider myself ready to be a competent teacher. I learned that teaching is definitely the profession for me and it also reinforced for me the belief that I do have teaching skills and that I will be able to do it. (Carissa)

There was an interconnectedness between community, school, and classroom as observed by the preservice teachers. These preservice teachers had opportunities to experience teaching in an RRR school and then, with their respective mentors, reflect and refine their practices to gain a deeper understanding for working in a remote location (see also Kolb, 1984). Although difficult to ascertain if it was equal across the three constructs, it was evident these five preservice teachers learnt about the connectedness between community, school, and classroom, and observed ways in which the school community work together to support the students' education. Additionally, the participants commented positively about the school activities driven by community needs and the support received by their mentors.

These preservice teachers learnt about the role of teachers in an RRR setting and how their work extended beyond the school with a focus on school students and a school teamwork approach. They were appreciative of the mentoring and collegiality across the three constructs (community, school, and classroom). Professionally, this RRR experience supported the preservice teachers to acquire knowledge relevant to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST; AITSL, 2011). As a graduate teacher, understanding the need to work with parents and carers, creating networks for professional learning, and working with colleagues are all desired attributes and practices (APST 7). Furthermore, catering for diversity, teaching Indigenous students (APST 1), classroom management (APST 4), assessment and moderation (APST 5) were reported as areas of learning and also practices required as graduate teachers (AITSL, 2011). In previous research, the latter were identified as areas where graduates self-reported a lack of confidence for teaching because of limited experiences (Hudson, Hudson, Weatherby-Fell, & Shipway, 2016). An RRR school context provided opportunities for the preservice teachers to experience student diversity and differentiation and develop associated teaching practices. Therefore, universities that incorporate RRR experiences can help graduates to more effectively achieve the standards in a meaningful context.

“Self” as a Foundational Construct

At the foundational level, these preservice teachers required food and accommodation to undertake the experience. They were appreciative of the financial support, *“the principal also helped me out personally with a voucher when I was broke”* (Simone). They needed to feel safe and have a sense of belonging, and this was where the five preservice teachers helped each other. To illustrate, Carissa stated, *“my peers were a perfect replacement for family. Strong relationships developed between us and there was a great sense of comradeship”* and Laura outlined she *“was very nervous. These guys (peers) took the place of my Mum and Dad”*. Similarly, Jesinta said, *“my family and I were nervous for me to be away from that kind of strong support... teaching is where I want to be”*. Without a supportive network of peers, some preservice teachers may struggle, for instance: *“By myself, I can tell you now, I wouldn't have lasted. Just having the others there made it all worthwhile”* (Simone). Psychological needs were a strong part of developing

self, for example, Brent commented that “all of this has made me quite resilient and able to cope with change, challenges and long days”.

Self needs to be at the centre of any model of readiness for teaching. Without the necessities of food, accommodation, safety, belonging and sound self-esteem (e.g., Maslow, 1954), preservice teacher engagement in RRR professional experiences would be diminished considerably. Similar to school students in the classroom having the basic necessities to facilitate learning, self also needs to be first and foremost in preservice teacher development. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs may provide a focus for further investigation about self-readiness for teaching in RRR contexts.

Although the number of participants is a limitation to the study, the outcomes indicated that providing preservice teachers with an RRR professional experience can be an effective method for securing teachers. The three constructs (community, school, and classroom) were devised for data analysis based on the work of White et al. (2012); yet further research can be more purposeful and include a greater focus on these constructs when devising interview questions, which will provide direct clarity. In addition, it is evident that these three constructs provide a broad framework for induction and mentoring in an RRR context. The preservice teachers commented about the importance of being welcomed, supported, made to feel part of the school and community, suggesting a fourth construct must be added as a more holistic model for RRR induction and mentoring. The construct of “self” allows the preservice teacher’s self-identity, sense of belonging and well-being in an RRR community to be included at the centre. Thus, a proposed model for future investigation would incorporate community, school, classroom, and self (Figure 1), which may provide a more holistic view of induction and mentoring into RRR schools.

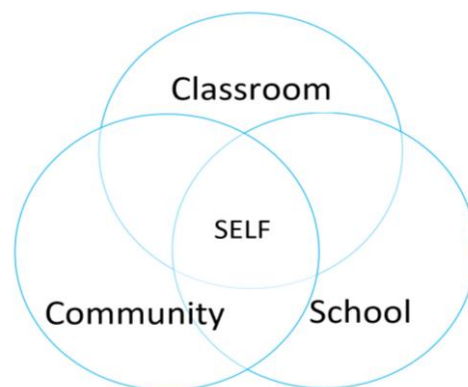


Figure 1: A model of teaching readiness: Community, school, classroom, and self.

Conclusion

The continued difficulties of attracting and retaining teachers in RRR locations will remain an issue unless programs and incentives are developed, which requires purposive partnerships. In this case study, preservice teachers were provided with an RRR professional experience to support them to make informed decisions about their future employment options. Through this RRR professional experience there was a greater understanding about the importance of the community, the school and the classroom. Although there are calls for “classroom readiness” (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014), teachers will also need to be school ready and community ready to understand the holistic nature of RRR teaching. While there are pockets of case studies (e.g., Over the Hill) demonstrating ways to attract and retain staff, systemic action is yet to be achieved. Indeed, researchers continue to explore models for classroom readiness (e.g., Tindall-Ford, Ledger, Williams, & Ambrosetti, 2018). The model (Figure 1) presented as a result of this current research needs to be explored further with additional case studies to include “self” (e.g., preservice teacher’s self-identity and belonging) as a construct.

Principals and mentor teachers need to be aware that preservice teachers must be supported for learning about community, school and classroom to be successful during professional experience. In an RRR context the support should include: meeting the basic needs of the preservice teacher such as food and accommodation; an ongoing induction that provides information about the school and the community and the role they play in the RRR setting; support in the classroom with a mentor teacher who will guide the professional development of the preservice teacher for teaching and monitor their social and emotional well-being; and, a collaborative school community that embraces and welcomes the preservice teacher and provides additional support through a community of mentors.

The mentee's identity and sense of belonging and well-being (self) needs to be at the centre, as little can be achieved if the mentee is not well supported to make the transition to the RRR context (Hazel & McCallum, 2016). Four of the preservice teachers in this study accepted positions at the school upon graduation. This successful collaboration between a school and university lead to positive outcomes for all stakeholders (e.g., university, employment and school-community relationships) including the school students who now have sufficient teachers at their school "ready" to teach in this RRR context. The project has now been running for three years and the RRR school involved has employed nine of the university's graduates in permanent positions or long-term contracts. School principals struggling for staff should be encouraged to contact universities to form partnerships for purposeful and strategic alliances. Universities are often keen to have preservice teachers with diverse professional experiences but are not always aware of the needs of RRR schools and their capabilities for supporting preservice teachers. Collaborative school-university programs can be designed to benefit the school, the preservice and graduate teachers, and most importantly, the students located in geographically isolated locations.

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