

# **PRACTICE TEACHING IN A DISTANCE EDUCATION CENTRE: EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHER EDUCATION STUDENTS**

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Practice teaching is an integral component of pre-service teacher education courses. Watson, Halton, Grundy and Squires (1986) clearly demonstrated that most New South Wales teacher education students came from metropolitan backgrounds, received their university tuition in a city based institution and completed their practice teaching in city schools. However, Watson, *et al* (1986) claimed that most of the city trained teachers were reluctant to accept a teaching appointment outside of the city. Under these conditions, long term solutions to the problem of high rural teacher turnover were unlikely to eventuate.

This situation is not unique to New South Wales. Murphy and Cross (1990) writing in the Canadian context reported similar problems for the staffing of rural British Columbia schools. Surwill (1990) writing on the preparation of rural teachers for Montana state in the United States of America argued for a specific component of teacher preparation courses that included both on-campus study and rural practice teaching experiences. Herzog and Pittman (1995) reported that pre-service teacher 'education programs [in the USA] have done little to provide educators with specialised training for work in rural areas' (p 114).

In Australia, rurally based teacher education programs have responded to this challenge in a number of ways. First, specific subjects on teaching in rural schools have been included in the academic studies, for example, Charles Sturt University (Boylan, Squires and Smith, 1994), University of Southern Queensland (King, 1994) and James Cook University (McSwan, 1985) have included rural education subjects in their pre-service courses.

Second, rural practice teaching experiences became a feature of many rural and some city based universities. Watson, *et al* (1986) reported on the positive outcomes for a group of Sydney teacher education students who completed a rural practice teaching experience. As final year students at University of Southern Queensland, Meiklejohn and Barrett (1994) provided student perspectives on the benefits of a remote rural practice teaching program. Hemmings and Boylan (1992) reported on the changes in attitude towards remote rural teaching for a group of Charles Sturt University students. They reported positive outcomes both for the students, the remote schools and their communities from the program as well as a marked increase in the number of students who would be prepared to accept a remote rural appointment.

Third, recent challenges for teachers working in rural schools have centred on the effect of the introduction of technology in the provision of curriculum. Robson, Routcliffe and Fitzgerald (1992) provided an overview of the range of technologies being used in schools across Australia. For pre-service education programs, the need to prepare students capable of teaching with the frequently used technologies in that state's schools is fundamental. Boylan, Squires and Smith (1994) reported on how final year teacher education students at Charles Sturt University received instruction on the operation of audiographics teaching equipment, had students establish links between the Bathurst and Wagga Wagga campuses (300 kms apart), required students to conduct mini-lessons to their peers at the other campus. Similar uses of audiographics have occurred at Edith Cowan University with West Australian pre-service students.

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## **A Distance Education Centre practice teaching experience**

In rural locations there are a variety of educational providers. Not only are there remote rural schools and provincial rural schools, but their size varies from 1 teacher schools to quite large schools. There are primary schools, high schools and K-10, or K-12 schools known as central schools, area schools, consolidated schools, district high schools across Australia. Pre-service teacher education students have completed their practice teaching experiences in all of these types and sizes of schools.

However, there is another group of educational providers in rural areas that often is overlooked as an appropriate venue for a practice teaching experience. This is the Distance Education Centre (DEC). A Distance Education Centre is usually established with a host school and provides educational access to children who are unable to attend school because of distance or disability (McIlrick, 1991). Within a DEC, teachers use audio based technologies such as radio lessons, teleconferences and audio tapes to complement the print based learning materials provided to these children. This omission has been identified at Charles Sturt University and over the past two years (1994, 1995) Charles Sturt University has responded by establishing close links with the primary DEC located in the Riverina region at Hay. This link has created the opportunity for pre-service students to complete one of their practice teaching experiences at Hay Primary DEC.

### **The Program at Charles Sturt University - Riverina**

In their final year of the Bachelor of Teaching (Primary) course, students study the subject, Education in Rural Contexts, and are required to complete a practice teaching experience. Following negotiations with the principal and teacher-in-charge at the Hay Primary DEC, approximately 270 kms to the west of Wagga Wagga, CSU students were offered the opportunity to complete this practice teaching at Hay Primary DEC.

The program started in 1994 and was repeated in 1995. In 1994, 5 students were placed in the Hay Primary DEC and in 1995, 6 students completed their practice teaching at the DEC.

### **Student evaluation of the DEC practice teaching**

*"It was most definitely a worthwhile experience which I would whole heartedly recommend to any teaching student." (female student, 1994)*

Both the 1994 and 1995 students were asked to evaluate the DEC experience. A short evaluation instrument consisting of 16 items using a likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree) and 4 open ended questions was developed to gather systematic data from the students on organisational issues, teaching related issues and personal professional development issues.

Responses from both the 1994 and 1995 groups were combined (N=11) and are reported in Table 1. The Strongly Agree and Agree categories were reduced to an Agree category and the Strongly Disagree and Disagree were combined into a Disagree response.

**TABLE 1**  
**Student Responses to DEC Organisation**

Issue Undecided	Agree		Disagree			
	%	N	%	N	%	N
1. DEC organisational issues						
a) I have become familiar with the range of resources used by the DEC	91	10	-	-	9	1
b) I had the opportunity to examine the home study materials used by the children	91	10	-	-	9	1

From these responses, it appears that students valued the opportunity to become familiar with the variety of resources and home study materials used by staff at the DEC.

In Table 2, student responses to the challenges of preparing, teaching and evaluating DEC pupil work are described.

**TABLE 2**  
**Teaching Related Issues**

Statement	Agree		Disagree		Undecided	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
1. I have learnt a lot about preparing work for distance education students	100	11	-	-	-	-
2. I found preparing for my on-air lessons challenging	64	7	9	1	27	3
3. I would have preferred more time teaching in the DEC	55	6	18	2	27	3
4. I found teaching my on-air lessons different from face-to-face teaching experiences	100	11	-	-	-	-
5. I enjoyed responding to students via audiotape	100	11	-	-	-	-
6. I found marking the student's work a valuable part of my practicum	100	11	-	-	-	-
7. I found providing feedback on students work an important part of the curriculum	91	10	-	-	9	1

Students found the interactive aspects of teaching distance students by on-air radio lessons and audio tapes to be a valuable learning experience for them.

Analysis of the open-ended responses indicated that this practice teaching experience had focussed the students' attention on the importance of verbal skills, developing new teaching strategies for distance education and provide comprehensive feedback to these isolated rural pupils.

All students agreed that the DEC practicum experience had enhanced their professional preparation for teaching. Three students wrote comments that through this practice teaching experience they were 'more willing to travel to remote rural areas' for employment.

Finally, students were asked to respond to this statement: 'Overall I enjoyed my experience at the Distance Education Centre'. All eleven students agreed with this statement. All stated that they would recommend this DEC practicum to other student at Charles Sturt University.

Teacher feedback on the student practice teaching experience was also positive. One teacher wrote '[student name] took the radio lesson on her second day in DE. She was unassisted and conducted the session with confidence and enthusiasm.' The teacher-in-charge of the DEC has requested that another group of students be assigned to the DEC for 1996. Additionally, one student from the 1995 cohort has requested placement at Hay Primary DEC for her 10 week extended practicum during Term 2 1996.

## Conclusion

Providing opportunities for students to undertake specialised courses of study in rural education and to complement this on-campus study with rural practice teaching experiences will ensure a supply of teachers who are prepared to seek rural appointments (Watson, *et al* 1986; Murphy and Cross, 1990; King, 1994).

A variety of rural appointments exists, one of which is the Distance Education Centre. By encouraging students to undertake a practice teaching experience in a DEC, Charles Sturt University has met this challenge. Feedback from the students who have completed a DEC practice teaching experience is encouraging. They reported personal and professional growth in understanding about the range of rural appointments as well as the challenges of preparing and teaching distance education pupils and the value of this form of practice teaching. To sum up, these quotes indicate the benefits:

"Overall, I had a great time." (female student, 1995)

"I enjoyed this most satisfying teaching dimension to the utmost."

(female student, 1994)

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Emma Byles teaching an on-air lesson at Hay Primary DEC.