

Bridging The Gap Between Beginning Teachers and Isolated/Rural Communities

**Luke Baills, Sherrin Bell, Bridget Greensill, Louise Wilcox, 4th and 3rd Year Education Students
University of Southern Queensland**

Abstract

This study considers the transition of beginning teachers and pre-service teachers from an undergraduate course to an isolated/rural community. There is an assumption by the community as a whole that these transitions are carried out with little success and feedback to the university tends to support this assumption. Contrary to these assumptions, beginning teachers view this transition as the next simple step following graduation. Moreover, there is growing evidence to suggest the gap is being bridged through opportunities offered to pre service educators. These opportunities foster the improvement and preparation of beginning teachers as they embark on a career in an isolated/rural community. This study attempts to address this under researched area. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with beginning teachers, pre service teachers and parents of children in isolated/rural communities. Early indications suggest the transition is not a smooth one. This may be due to the differing expectation of beginning teachers and the community involved. It is anticipated however, that further analysis will reveal a range of transition patterns and solutions to assist in bridging the gap between beginning teachers and isolated/rural communities.

Introduction

Bridging the gap between educators and communities is difficult, this is seen moreover in rural schools but does not exclude their urban counterparts. It is often suggested that mainly experienced teachers who benefit from an educational and social support system staff these city schools. In rural areas, which tend to be staffed by beginning teachers and are distant from expert help, these complications are exacerbated.

The difference between rural and urban life is immeasurable, and as many young teachers have not lived in isolated/rural areas before being appointed to one, they may not comprehend, the very distinctive rural culture the encounter.

Another of the disadvantages that beginning teachers face, are the high expectations rural communities have on their teachers. The Commonwealth Schools Commission (1998) found that rural communities expected teachers to be; enthusiastic, well educated, professional, live within the community, understanding of rural values, and able to integrate professional expertise into rural life. The Commonwealth Schools Commission (1998) stated:

Given that many teachers appointed to rural schools are young and relatively inexperienced, and will have grown up and undergone teacher education programs in an urban environment, it is not surprising that many find that meeting these expectations can be a difficult task

The Commission listed the following factors affecting teachers willingness to remain in rural areas; induction into rural living, preparation for rural teaching prior to appointment, level of support available in rural schools, and prospects for future promotion or transfer to a preferred location.

It is widely agreed amongst pre service teachers that there is insufficient preparation for rural teaching. Only those who come from isolated/rural communities are able to adjust quickly to the realities of rural life. Two significant factors warrant some careful consideration when addressing the gap between beginning teachers and isolated/rural communities, namely:

1. Complacency and lack of support from the community; and
2. Lack of support for pupils at home.

From the perspective of the types of pre service teaching opportunities offered at a regional Queensland university, attempts are being made to give pre service teachers an insight into the realities of teaching in an isolated/rural community.

It is evident that through these opportunities, an understanding and an appreciation of rural lifestyles can influence how successfully beginning teachers interact with the whole community and with the students they eventually teach.

Background

There are a variety of rural educational opportunities provided during the four year Bachelor of Education course and the University of Southern Queensland. These opportunities include: Isolated Children's Project, Isolated Schools' Project, Priority Country Area Program Camp Coordinator, a fourth year non compulsory elective unit Teaching in Small Rural Communities, and an opportunity to teach in a rural school for the six week teaching block at the end of the year with sponsorship by the ICPA.

These non-compulsory opportunities are made available to pre service teachers after the completion of their second year.

Isolated Children's Project

The ICP is offered to pre service teachers in their third year and is non-evaluative and non-compulsory. This experience enables the student to become accustomed to the educational and social difficulties families encounter in an isolated/rural community. The pre service teacher lives with a family who has volunteered for the project, and takes on the role of assisting in tutoring the children. They are also to experience the lifestyle diversity encountered by those living in an isolated/rural community.

Isolated Schools' Project

The aim of this project is to allow the participants to experience teaching in a small, isolated school in a non-evaluative situation. One objective of the project is to encourage graduating teachers to view teaching in a rural setting as a positive experience.

Participants volunteer for the experience and complete the project in a vacation period, usually January/February. The February placement has proved particularly successful as students' experience first hand the commencement of a school year and teachers have extra help at a very busy period. The majority of the participants return from this experience with a positive outlook about the prospect of teaching in a rural setting. As there is no formal evaluation of this experience then the student is able to work alongside the teacher as a teaching assistant, which proves to be most valuable.

Priority Country Area Program – Camp Coordinator

PCAP is a program offered to students between the ages of 12 and 14 from an isolated/rural educational setting. These students have been selected by showing exceptional ability in a chosen subject area. In completing this position, they are required to develop a program moving from simple to more complex activities for the students to complete within three or four days.

Teaching in Small Rural Communities

The predominant focus of this unit emphasises issues relating to the structure of education in rural Australia, teaching practice and curriculum delivery methods appropriate to a rural context. Teaching methodology for this unit incorporates an experiential component, which familiarises the student with an array of educational agencies providing support services to rural communities. Understanding of the needs of specific rural education agencies will be further developed through a process of modelling, simulation and role-play. Participation in an analysis of both the larger policy context relevant to small rural schools and the administrative expectations appropriate for these settings will complete the preparation of a beginning teacher for a rural placement.

ICPA Practicum Teaching Sponsorship

This six-week practicum experience is the final teaching experience for fourth year undergraduates at the University of Southern Queensland. The conditions of this final teaching experience are that the school must be multi-age. The pre service teacher is to take the class for the entire six weeks. ICPA assist in the organisation of travel and living arrangements for the pre service teacher and placements are limited. This is offered initially to students who have not participated in ICP and ISP. This practicum experience is assessed by the supervising teacher and supports the departmental rating. All graduating and in service teachers receive a departmental rating. It places the teacher on a scale from S1 to S4, whereby S1 is an outstanding applicant and S4 is an unsatisfactory applicant.

In looking at these existing opportunities offered to the pre service teachers in regional universities around Queensland, it is evident that attempts are being made to bridge the gap between beginning teachers and the isolated/rural communities to which they are appointed. Those students, who are in the forefront of volunteering for these projects, are the pre service teachers who are willingly anticipating placement in an isolated/rural community.

It must be acknowledged that due to these experiences being voluntary, there is still the problem of only those who are willing participants who express a desire to participate in this program. Unfortunately, there still remain a large percentage of pre service teachers who decline these given opportunities and fail to make the necessary accommodations for their future isolated/rural teaching placements.

Collection of Data: Concerns of Pre Service/Beginning Teachers

Professional Concerns

In listening to pre service teachers, it is often suggested that there are several professional issues that affect the performance of a beginning teacher in an isolated/rural community. The most common of these issues is lack of departmental support networks. Arranging a simple half an hour meeting on a Monday morning with a visiting support teacher is often a simple task in urban Brisbane, but in far west Queensland the waiting time could be as long as two weeks. So often is the case that this assistance is needed immediately to help a particular child, and a delay of this kind could mean the child is disadvantaged. Although pre service educators see this as a major concern the community see that solving the issue is simple. Computer mediated communication systems are vastly becoming available to assist in overcoming this growing concern of pre service educators. Although it is often the case that support teachers need to observe the special needs child in the school environment and on a one to one basis, this can not simply be achieved using technology. Another contentious issue that is raised among pre service and beginning teachers is inadequate pre service teacher preparation. Attempts are being made by the institutions to provide rural teaching/lifestyle experiences for pre service teachers. However, due to these being non-compulsory many pre service teachers do not take advantage of these experiences. Finally, the issue of multi-age classrooms and the difficulty beginning teacher's face in catering for the differences in strands within the curriculum is one that needs attention. In attending to this, one cannot expect the university institutions to take full responsibility the Department and experienced teachers must also offer greater assistance.

Social Concerns

Higgins (1993) found in some small, but well-established rural places, the community's members are well aware only temporary residents, keep good company with other officers employed by a variety of government agencies or major banks. For some residents, the cost of investing too much energy in befriending peripatetic teachers is too high. It is to this extent that teachers suffer social isolation and tend to turn more towards other non-permanent residents for social relaxation. Socialisation occurs equally in rural and urban societies, but its effects stand out clearly in smaller isolated communities. As a consequence, the more distant the teachers are from the concerns of the families, the greater is the communication gap between the teachers, students and the families. It is in the author's opinion that electronic communication has, as yet failed to overcome the tyranny of distance. One of the main concerns for a beginning teacher in an isolated/rural placement is social isolation and distance. Having completed their pre service training in an urban area, where strong friendships are formed, the reality of being hundreds of kilometres from family, friends and an urban lifestyle is often daunting.

Most beginning teachers in isolated places find the dry climate harsh, and social climate narrow, barren and restrictive compared with the urban experiences. What may be difficult to envisage is that when teachers initially enter a rural community, they are often continually scrutinised by the local population, due to their position in the

town. The pressures on teachers to conform to certain social standards are greatly intensified due to this and their novelty to the community.

Industrial Concerns

In terms of industrial issues, pre service and beginning teachers commented on high mobility, inadequacy of allowances given and accommodation provided. Often the teachers sent to these isolated/rural areas are relatively inexperienced and are commencing their first year. What is regularly forgotten by society, is that everyone has to start somewhere. It is often the case, that this 'somewhere' is an isolated/rural community. The issue of accommodation is a concern for teachers. This can be due to the lack of facilities available, and quality of accommodation provided.

The cost of living in an isolated/rural community is more often than not, higher than that of teachers' urban counterparts. Because of the distances involved in travelling to the closest regional business centre, the cost of living is increased. Costs associated with phone calls are high because of STD charges (see Diagram 1.2), fuel prices are much higher (see Diagram 1.3) and costs of repairs to vehicles can be inflated because of distance and isolation.

When travelling to home destinations, the costs can become enormous because of the type of travel required whether it is by air, train or car. There are allowances provided to teachers now to assist in these added living costs, but the question remains, is it enough compensation to attract the more experienced teachers?

Concerns of the Isolated/Rural Communities

In addressing the concerns of the pre service teachers, it is apparent also that the isolated/rural communities have 'real' and justifiable concerns of their own. While the beginning teacher is concerned initially in doing 'what is right' for their call in a 'by the book' sense, they often forget that within these rural communities, there may be people who feel threatened by these teachers' 'educated' knowledge. This may affect the relationship between some of the members within the community and the teacher. Another concern is that the new teachers will keep to themselves and not interact socially with the wider community. Initially, both parties may be sensitive to the reactions of the other, therefore limiting the frequency of interactions with each other.

As placement in isolated/rural areas is unpopular with many established teachers, the community often notices that the new teacher at school, may be young, and relatively inexperienced. Due to previous experiences, there may be assumptions made about the intentions of the teacher as to how much time and effort will be invested into the school. This has a negative impact within the community and often sours the experience of the next 'inexperienced' teacher who is placed there.

Indications of the high mobility rates of teachers within isolated/rural communities often leave the community questioning the quality and the importance of education within their area. It is often the attitudes and the action of the teacher, which further exacerbates this sensitive issue and leaves the community wondering is education important in our community.

A concern of the community is that the beginning teachers are commencing their placement in an unknown environment, where their expectations of the availability of facilities, technology and resources are misconceptualised. These misconceptions are generally unjustified due to the lack of understanding of isolated/rural communities and the education department.

Another barrier is the high mobility rates of teachers in isolated/rural schools. This could be due largely to the desire to complete their 'rural service' as quickly as possible, by accumulating the required transfer points in order to settle into the more desired regions such as coastal, capital cities and urban areas.

When beginning teachers come to the rural communities they are seen as idealists and are often full of enthusiasm. This is not seen as a negative aspect, however, this enthusiasm is often depleted due to the fact that the realities of the diverse rural lifestyles become more apparent.

Professional Concerns

As a part of the development of services provided to teachers in isolated and rural schools, there is an increasing amount of professional assistance or professional development opportunities available to teachers. This type of assistance enables beginning teachers to become more informed of the current trends and developments occurring within the education department.

Another type of support available for teachers in isolated/rural areas, is the itinerant specialist teacher who visits the school on a regular basis. These specialists include: LOTE, music, physical education, and special needs teachers. Although in urban areas these teachers may be located directly within the school and are able to assist both the teachers and the students more regularly, they are still available to students and teachers in the more isolated/rural areas.

Analysing the Data

Overcoming the Concerns of Pre Service/Beginning Teachers

In overcoming the already defined concerns of pre service/beginning teachers, strategies must be addressed to overcome these barriers. Anecdotal data that was gathered suggests that these barriers are not impossible to overcome. Beginning teachers need to look at how they can make a difference in the transition patterns that pre service teachers take into rural communities, thus adding to the benefits received by both community and teacher. Strategies that are offered in this discussion paper have been suggested by beginning teachers, pre service teachers and experienced teachers of rural education.

Professional Issues

In addressing the lack of departmental support networks it is difficult to pin point any major strategy that would work in all cases. This is not only a concern for beginning teachers, but a real concern for parents. Unfortunately, concerns regarding this may never be overcome due to lack of resources and economic funding. Having said this, it must be noted that there are many possible strategies that may be of benefit in overcoming such economic constraints. By assigning an experienced, registered teacher to each nominated district to fulfill the supportive role, which is needed in these areas, allows the bridging of the gap between beginning teachers and the Education Department to commence. Therefore, the assumption that beginning teachers can not assist in breaking down these barriers is one that holds little truth. If beginning teachers continue to hold this biased view, that the department is non-supportive, the instead of bridging the gap one could expect the gap to widen.

Inadequate teacher preparation is too often argued as the fault of tertiary institutions. Such pressure should not be placed on our tertiary institutions by society to prepare our pre service teachers for all possible outcomes. By placing such pressures on tertiary institutions will not result in the perfectly prepared teacher. Tertiary institutions cannot be expected to prepare our teachers for every outcome, therefore placing expectations that can not physically be met only creates a course of failure. Expectations should be placed on the individual pre service teachers, not the universities. As previously stated, opportunities are on offer for pre service educators to experience rural life. Unfortunately education undergraduates all too often pass up these opportunities. Throughout Queensland, universities are offering varied and diverse opportunities to their pre service teachers whether it is rural, indigenous or overseas. The problem arises when these experiences are offered as non-compulsory additional experiences. The answer to this issue is not a simple one, but compulsory units related to such experiences could be a strategy. Tertiary institutions conducting such core units, will, in the authors' opinion, better prepare its graduates for the experiences they may encounter in the first teaching placement.

Social Issues

The concerns that are often placed within this category can be overcome by introducing an 'adopt a teacher' scheme. This scheme involves a family adopting a beginning teacher or experienced teacher for the introductory period of their placement. By becoming involved with a particular family, the beginning teacher is given an insight with support into community life in a rural/isolated area. For example, if your washing machine breaks down, then you will have a support network within the community that allows you to use your adopted families' washing machine until yours is repaired. The adopted family could also introduce the beginning teacher to the people within the community, both socially and professionally. For example, if your washing machine did break down they would suggest to whom you could go to in the community to have it repaired.

Although it maybe easier for beginning teachers to seek friendships with other professionals, it is a concern not only for the beginning teacher, but also the community. As new members of an isolated/rural community, the beginning teacher should attempt to move outside the safety of the 'professional square' and into the broader sector. By forming friendships with the local residents and its professionals, the beginning teacher places himself, herself on a

more personable level, therefore gaining greater respect from the community. It is through this symbiotic relationship that beginning teachers and the community can begin to bridge the gap.

It has been suggested that advances in technological communications may be creating a breakthrough in reducing the tyranny of distance. Beginning teachers should have access to electronic mailing facilities, which could be argued as the next best thing to personal communication. Computer technology has undoubtedly reduced distance, and in doing so has assisted in reducing the emotional and social stratification that is too often placed on beginning teachers. On the other hand technology will never take the place of physical communication. By thinking about and acting upon some of these strategies, many of the issues relating to social isolation, distance and conforming to community expectations could be overcome with less heartache.

Industrial Concerns

In addressing the Industrial Concerns of beginning teachers, there are many 'real' issues, which need to be addressed. One of the major concerns mentioned previously is the high mobility rate of teachers; this is due mainly to teachers not wanting certain teaching positions to which they are elected. It needs to be recognised that there are certain people who just do not enjoy isolated/rural teaching placements. These teachers can not be forced to spend time in these areas, as it will have a negative twofold effect. Firstly, the students and the families will be affected and the teacher will have a negative attitude toward isolated/rural areas and teaching in general. Instead, those who are willing to pursue their career within these areas should be given preference to teach in these settings. In doing so, these teachers should receive incentives from the department for their dedication and service to teaching within these areas.

The location of the school is dependent upon the allowances and incentives given to teachers. Departmental decisions need to be made which provide adequate funding to keep teachers within these areas for longer periods of time. The incentives could include having contractual agreements with the Department of Education. As a suggestion these could outline additional 'bonus' payments made to the teacher once a certain teaching period has been completed. Then, at the completion of the contractual agreement this lump sum payment could be made.

In regards to teacher accommodation, more flexibility needs to be ensured taking into account the choice of alternative accommodation provided. If the accommodation available is inadequate, then the teachers should have the opportunity to live in other accommodation (if available) and should be given 'living' allowances to cater for that. In overcoming these issues, the Education Department needs to recognise these as valid concerns affecting all teachers, regardless of age or experience, within isolated/rural areas. It would appear that a successful address of these identified issues would prove beneficial to all parties involved. There may be an improved contingent of the type and quality of teaching provided to these communities and these teachers may also extend their contractual period in these areas. As a result the department may see an increase in teachers seeking isolated/rural placements.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Overcoming the concerns of Isolated/Rural communities

In bridging the gap, there are a number of issues, which need to be addressed. The beginning teacher and the community need to work together in a cooperative partnership, which will then benefit all involved, the following have been identified:

What is being done to assist beginning teachers moving into rural/isolated communities?

Pre service teachers are being encouraged to spend time in as many schools as possible, both in the immediate district and in other areas. The observations from the experiences would prove beneficial in the long term as he/she makes his/her way into a rural or isolated placement with greater knowledge of teaching strategies and classroom operation. "Meet the Teachers" nights held at the beginning of the year enable the new teacher and the community to introduce and get acquainted with each other. Barbecue and tennis nights throughout the year are also proving effective in bringing the beginning teacher and the community together. Organising these functions readily throughout the year enables a continual progression of understanding and builds a stronger rapport between both parties. It has also been acknowledged that some communities are choosing to promote their community in a positive light by sending out information packages about their town and surrounding areas to new coming members of the community.

How can the community and beginning teachers work better together?

As mentioned previously, an "adopt a teacher" scheme can be beneficial to all involved, during the initial stage of placement. Upon receiving notification of placement, it would be advantageous for the teacher to liaise with the community, well before the official start of the school year. Teachers should also be willing to accept assistance from community members, whether it be offered freely or asked for. When forming friendships, initiative needs to be taken. For example, if someone suggests that the beginning teacher should visit their home, they should not wait to be called back, instead they should give them a call – they won't mind.

Issues that need to be considered

The main issue which has arisen from this study, that beginning teachers, given isolated/rural placements need to have a positive outlook on this aspect. Not only this, but on the rest of their teaching career. These teachers need to see their experience in isolated/rural communities as one of many experiences, which will hopefully be memorable and rewarding. "Whilst two years may seem an eternity in your early years of your teaching career, it will be but a drop in the ocean in the scope of things by the end of your career" (S. Philp).

The most important strategies that need to be addressed

Essential support services need to be made more readily available to beginning teachers, especially those located in isolated/rural communities. Such forms of support include the provision of caring, experienced and approachable principals who will support these teachers. There needs to be semi formal meetings within the district, allowing beginning teachers to interact and discuss issues with each other and more experienced teachers.

Flexibility and understanding is the key to bridging the gap between the beginning teacher and the isolated/rural community. There needs to be flexibility on both sides. Community expectance needs to be tempered when a new teacher begins at their school. (Expectancy means pre conceived notions of work ethic, and comparisons to predecessors within the teaching profession.)

If all the issues of concern can somehow be addressed successfully, the gap between beginning teachers and isolated/rural communities would surely begin to be bridged. It may take time but accepting that there are issues and taking initiative in combating them would surely see positive results.

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