

# A TASTE OF COUNTRY: A PRE-SERVICE TEACHER RURAL FIELD TRIP

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In order to improve recruitment of teachers to rural schools, preservice teachers need opportunities to become familiar with rural education contexts, overcome anxieties promoted by negative stereotypes and build confidence in their professional and personal abilities. Traditional approaches involve rural practicums which are not feasible for many preservice teachers. The Rural Education Field Trip provides an alternative mechanism for promoting familiarity with rural schools in a cost and time effective manner. This paper describes the Rural Education Field Trip offered by The University of Western Australia, identifying the benefits perceived by a variety of stakeholders.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

For many preservice teachers the concept of teaching in rural schools is fraught with negative stereotypes and insidious unknowns (Sharplin, 2002a). With the majority of pre-service teachers drawn from metropolitan contexts and enrolled in metropolitan based teacher education courses (Boylan & Wallace, 2007), it is understandable that anxiety about commencing a career in a rural area is compounded by fears of isolation, cultural differences and scarcity of resources. Tertiary rural education units and rural teaching experience have been identified as fundamental strategies for effective preparation of rural teachers (Boylan, 2005; Lock, 2007). Similarly, the value of rural practicums, of varied formats, has been noted and advocated by a range of professions (Daniels, Van Leit, Skipper, Sanders & Rhyne, 2007; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2003; Munsch & Boylan, 2005). Penman (2005, p. 81) concluded that "short-term academic experiences in culturally diverse work places have been shown to contribute positively to personal and professional development". However, for preservice teachers with family and employment commitments, an absence of weeks or months for a rural practicum can represent an insurmountable financial and personal cost (Halsey, 2005). Alternatively, rural internships are an option for some preservice teachers (Sharplin, 2002b).

Within preservice teacher education programs at The University of Western Australia (UWA), students are encouraged to complete a rural education practicum through the Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP) program offered by the Department of Education of Western Australia (DEWTA) (Lock, 2008) or an

internship in the last term of their course. However, since 1999, The Graduate School of Education has successfully operated an alternative rural teaching experience - a Rural Education Field Trip. This six-day journey showcases a diversity of rural communities, landscapes, industries, educational institutions and forms of educational provision. The Rural Education Field Trip achieves positive outcomes for a range of stakeholders: the preservice teachers; the visited schools; and more broadly, rural communities and schools.

## **THE FIELD TRIP IN CONTEXT**

The Rural Education Field Trip is a voluntary component of an elective unit, Rural Education in Australia, offered in the second semester of the one year Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary Education). The unit is selected by an average of 15 preservice teachers per year, some of whom elect to complete a rural practicum instead of the field trip.

In the past, between 10 and 19 preservice teachers have attended the field trip, with the optimum number being 12. Because of the sizes of the schools visited, large groups of pre-service teachers cannot be accommodated in schools without overwhelming the student and teacher populations. The preservice teachers are accompanied by the unit coordinator and a bus driver/support staff. A mini-research project on a self-selected topic related to the unit sessions and readings and a written reflection on their experiences form part of the unit assessment. The Field Trip is counted as one week of practicum experience and is conducted in the first week of the second practicum.

## **THE RATIONALE**

The purpose of the field trip is to familiarise preservice teachers with rural education contexts, in the broadest sense. To this end, an itinerary has been shaped to expose them to a diversity of educational institutions, delivery systems and a diversity of communities supported by a variety of primary industries. The trip encompasses opportunities to enjoy the geographic diversity of rural Western Australia, to socialise with rural teachers, to experience rural community hospitality and to interact with rural students. The preservice teachers see, first hand, the resources that are available in schools and towns and the housing provided by the Department of Housing and Works. The trip provides real contexts to which they can apply and synthesise their course theory.

Because the field trip represents one week of practicum, the preservice teachers, where possible, are placed in classes, from Kindergarten to Senior Secondary, to observe and teach students, with an emphasis placed on establishing rapport with students and creating fun learning activities. The placement of the preservice teachers "out of field" (that is, in phases of learning other than secondary teaching and in classes not strictly relevant to their curriculum expertise) is intended to give the preservice teachers experience out of their comfort zone and to develop attitudes of flexibility and adaptability, given that out of field placement is a frequent experience of rural teacher graduates (Rood, 2007; Sharplin, 2008).

While the itinerary represents quite a punishing schedule, the travel time between locations and communal meal times provide opportunities to collaboratively reflect, discuss and argue about their experiences, perceptions of locations, programmes and rethink attitudes to contentious issues. As with any “residential” experience, the preservice teachers form a strong positive rapport, similar to that experienced by teachers working and living together in rural schools.

## THE ITINERARY

The Mid West region (see figure 1) was selected for the field trip because it offers maximum variation within an accessible distance from the Perth metropolitan region. The exact itinerary changes from year to year, depending on opportunities which arise, and in response to student feedback. The 2009 itinerary is given in table 1 with a description of the activities undertaken at each location. The itinerary encompasses visits to four communities, from inland Mount Magnet (600 km from Perth) to coastal Geraldton and agricultural communities of Mullewa and Morawa. In each location the primary activity is to teach and observe in classrooms; however a range of social and informational activities provides preservice teachers with opportunities to learn about a variety of support and ancillary services and develop an appreciation of the broader geographic, cultural and social opportunities of rural and remote living.

Figure 1. Map of the Mid West region of Western Australia



**Table 1. Itinerary for rural education field trip**

	Place	Description of context	Activity and Objective
Sun	Travel to Austin Downs Station, 630 km	Austin Downs is a cross generational sheep station. The host is an OT actively involved in indigenous health programs and parent to three primary school-aged children, educated via School of the Air (SOTA).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience pastoral station context</li> <li>• Talk by station owner – an Occupational Therapy and indigenous health-education issues</li> <li>• Interaction with station children who are schooled through Meekatharra School of the Air (SOTA)</li> </ul>
Mon	Travel 80km to Mount Magnet District High School (MMDHS)	<p>Mount Magnet is an inland community, supported by mining and pastoral industries. Recent closures of mines have seen a significant decline in the population.</p> <p>MMDHS has a student population of 130 with 14 teachers and 3 administrators.</p> <p>75% of students are indigenous.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to school context</li> <li>• Placement in classes to observe and teach</li> <li>• Tour of local indigenous rock art sites or local mine to appreciate the cultural/ economic context</li> <li>• Meal with staff at local hotel to interact with broader community</li> <li>• Billeted with local staff to see GROH housing and discuss experiences of working and living in rural communities</li> </ul>
Tues	<p>Travel 242 km to Mullewa DHS (MDHS)</p> <p>Travel 97 km to Geraldton</p>	<p>Mullewa is located in a prime wheat/sheep farming community. Many pastoralists send their children to boarding school in Perth or Geraldton.</p> <p>MDHS has a student population of 97 indigenous students. The school has 11 teachers and 2 administrators</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the school context</li> <li>• Placement in classes to observe and teach</li> <li>• Talk by Graduate teacher about first year experiences</li> </ul>
Wed	<p>John Willcock College/ Geraldton Senior College</p> <p>Geraldton Residential College</p> <p>Mid West District Office Tour</p>	<p>Geraldton is a coastal regional port centre with a population of over 30,000. In addition to the two public secondary schools, there are three independent colleges.</p> <p>John Willcock is a Middle school (Yr 8/9) with a 1:1 laptop program for all students. Geraldton Senior is a Senior School (Yr 10-12).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the school context</li> <li>• Placement in classes to observe and teach</li> <li>• Visit to see Boarding facilities</li> <li>• Presentation by Manager of the District Office to outline support services for new graduates</li> </ul>
Thur	<p>School of the Air (SOTA)</p> <p>Travel 180 km to Morawa</p> <p>Western Australian College of Agriculture (Morawa)</p>	<p>This is one of five SOTAs which provide education to geographically isolated students by online, telephone and paper-based media.</p> <p>This is one of five Agricultural Colleges providing education for students in Yr 10-12 in a boarding facility located on a farming complex.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in online lessons to SOTA students. Presentation about the SOTA system and tour of facilities.</li> <li>• Introduction to Agricultural College system, curriculum, tour of farm and resources</li> <li>• Tour of community. Shire presentation on the Morawa Education Alliance</li> <li>• Opportunity to socialize with teachers and community members at a community BBQ</li> </ul>
Fri	<p>Morawa DHS</p> <p>Travel 400 to Perth</p>	<p>Morawa is a wheat/mining community.</p> <p>Morawa DHS has 165 students, with 23% indigenous. There are 13 staff and 3 administrators.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the school context</li> <li>• Placement in classes to observe and teach</li> <li>• Lunchtime interaction with staff</li> </ul>

## THE OUTCOMES

The preservice teachers complete an open ended pre and post trip questionnaire to evaluate the trip and its impact on their: attitudes to teaching in rural communities; expectations of rural teaching and living; satisfaction with the field trip experience and recommendations. This data has been collected for six years, since 2002, however, complete data were not available for 2003 and 2005 and the trip was not offered in 2007. Other feedback has been collected anecdotally and from impromptu sources (verbal comments and unsolicited correspondence). The questionnaire data was summarised thematically, identifying frequency of responses. From this data it is evident that the field trip has direct and indirect outcomes for a variety of stakeholders: the preservice teachers, the schools, and more generally to the broader rural communities and their schools.

### Preservice Teachers

In 2008, 10 preservice teachers attended the rural Education Field Trip. Of these, two preservice teachers were part time students continuing their studies in 2009. Of the remaining eight preservice teachers, six (75%) commenced a rural placement in 2009, two of these in schools visited as part of the field trip experience and another within the region.

A meta-analysis of feedback from alternate years from 2002-2008 on three key questions is presented in table 2. Respondents were asked how their ideas about rural education had changed, identifying what knowledge, skills and experience they had gained and how they had benefited from participation on the trip. They were asked to comment on positive and negative aspects of rural and remote teaching observed during the trip. Findings relating to these questions for an early cohort are reported in Sharplin (2002a).

Table 2. Meta-analysis of preservice teacher post-trip feedback in 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008.

Year	No. attending	No. of evaluations returned	Have your ideas changed?		Would you teach in a rural school next year?				Did this trip fulfil your expectations?	
			Yes	No	Yes	Unsure	No	OC*	Yes	No
2008	10	10	9	1	8		1	1	10	
2006	11	10	8	2	4	4	1		10	
2004	13	9	9		5	2	2		9	
2002	19	19	18	1	14	2	1	3	19	
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>48</b>	
<b>Percentage of Returns</b>			<b>92%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\*OC – other commitments

Ninety-two percent of preservice teachers indicated that the field trip provided them with experiences that shaped their understanding of rural and remote education. Respondents most frequently reported that the trip had been “an eye-opening experience”. Negative expectations and fears were challenged by the trip. Most reported the formation of positive attitudes to rural teaching and stronger belief in their ability to cope with rural and remote situations. A sample of typical positive comments includes:

*Prior to this field trip, when asked if I would ever go rural I would answer with a definite No! But now that I have had the opportunity to view the schools and lifestyles my opinion has definitely changed. (2004)*

*The idea of teaching in a remote school is a lot less daunting. (2002)*

*I guess it's a lot to do with fear of the unknown. Now that I have visited some rural areas they don't seem so scary. (2002)*

*This experience has shown me how beneficial it is to be part of a community and how these communities function. Also becoming aware of the issues and ways for dealing with these issues has been great. (2008)*

Respondents' identified areas of knowledge gained, such as an understanding of student literacy and numeracy levels, the diversity of schools and resourcing, behaviour management approaches and indigenous education strategies. Some identified the essential characteristics of the type of rural or remote location they would prefer in terms of size, geographic or climatic conditions and community attributes. A rare negative comment was: "this trip has shattered my picture of a nice country school", but despite this, the respondent indicated an intention to seek rural employment. When respondents indicated that their views had not changed, this was frequently because the rural field trip had affirmed existing positive ideas.

Sixty five percent of preservice teachers attending the Field Trip over four years indicated they would apply for a rural or remote position as a new graduate. Of those choosing not to apply for a rural position, some were continuing their studies and others had existing personal and employment commitments. All these preservice teachers indicated their interest in seeking a rural appointment at a subsequent time in their career. Overall, 73% indicated that they would like to teach in a rural school at some stage, 16 % indicated they were unsure and only 10% of respondents indicated they would not seek a rural appointment. The following comments were typical of those declining rural employment:

*I don't think I could live in a small community, but I could live in [Regional Centre]. (2002)*

However, a decision not to seek a rural appointment can still be perceived as a positive outcome from the Rural Education Field Trip, both for the preservice teacher and rural schools. A decision not to accept a rural appointment may prevent distress for the graduate teacher and disruption to schools and communities coping with a stressed teacher, unhappy with their appointment and possibly leading to teacher turnover.

The comments from the 2008 cohort reflect preservice teachers' positive evaluation of the experience. For all responding preservice teachers, in all years, the Rural Education Field Trip has exceeded their expectations:

*This trip was amazing and surpassed my expectations completely! I was expecting to experience country teaching only, but I was able to experience the entire lifestyle of being a teacher in a rural or remote area. I learnt so much over those five days.*

*I had decided a while ago I would like to teach in the country, but had always been concerned about the transition, distance and the expectations. I was always worried about how different the schools would be from those I had experienced in the city. Having been on this trip has made me realise I had no reason to be daunted by the idea of teaching in the country. The schools were far less intimidating than I expected, and the rewards far outweigh the concerns most teachers would have.*

*I have learned more in a week than in a semester of theory-based stuff. Talking to teachers in these areas was very helpful.*

*It has been eye-opening and exciting...we began on such a positive note but we were also made aware of schools that would not be so welcoming. We experienced the Ag[ricultural]. School which was a completely new and amazing experience. Over all, the welcoming feelings from the small towns were inspiring.*

*Benefited immensely – knowledge – the diversity required to teach in a rural community. Constructive engagement with Aboriginal students. Knowledge of ALS (Aboriginal Literacy Strategy)/ transience and resilience of students.*

*I have a much deeper understanding of how teachers in rural towns support each other both at work and socially. Practical knowledge of the housing available and whether a 4WD is necessary are important considerations....The field trip was an excellent opportunity to observe different rural/remote towns. It was challenging but allowed you to participate in the daily lessons of the schools and prove the skills you had acquired in the Dip Ed.*

In addition, the research projects and reflections submitted as assessments for the unit further attest to the value of the field trip. The pre-service teachers are often surprised by the findings of their research, again showing how their expectations have been challenged and their reflections convey detailed, thoughtful analysis of the situations they observed.

The Rural Field Trip has been identified as a very rich learning experience, allowing preservice teachers to synthesise their course knowledge, apply their theoretical understandings to real world contexts, evaluate their personal positions, reflect on their personal reactions to situations, all occurring in a supportive collaborative environment.

## **The Schools**

The feedback from principals, teachers and parents, at all the locations visited, was very positive. The form of this feedback included oral communication during the trip, letters and emails directly to the coordinator and submitted to DETWA. The University has open invitations to return to each location and offers to assist with accommodation of preservice teachers in future years. The outcomes noted by school staff include:

- professional learning for school staff from the observation of teaching approaches and strategies used by preservice teachers, particularly in specialist secondary areas;
- innovative learning experiences for school children, including access to specialist equipment (children from one school recalled the equipment that they had seen the previous year and were able to recall their learning);
- a morale boost to the school from positive interactions with other educators; and
- opportunities to network and clarify understandings of curriculum developments with other educators.

Comments from school staff included:

*A breath of fresh air for all of us. (Principal)*

*Teachers all commented on how effective the lessons were and it gave them a good opportunity to observe their students and gain some valuable teaching ideas. (Former Principal)*

*It was such a refreshing experience to interact with your students and watch them interact with our students, showcasing engaging and exciting lesson plans that has had the students here excited about school. As a teacher who graduated only two years ago, I would have loved to have had the experience to come out to schools like ours and see what country teaching can offer new graduates. (Teacher)*

## **Rural Communities and Rural Schools**

Direct feedback from the rural community has never been formally sought as part of the Field Trip evaluation, because it was considered that direct impact from such a fleeting visit would be difficult to ascertain. However, anecdotal feedback has been communicated to the coordinator through unsolicited correspondence and indirect comments passed on through the schools:

*It is extraordinary how long the educational results of your visits have lasted. Mt Magnet teachers have told me they have seen similar benefits to their students. Visits like yours open the eye of students to the opportunities that are available in the wider world. And they remind the grown-ups that the close connection between country and city is still there. (Parent)*

*[The preservice teacher] made a big impression...he talked about the lesson a lot. (Parent)*

More generally, employment outcomes to rural schools can be seen as a positive outcome for rural communities. Employment intentions and outcomes provide an indication of the Field Trip impacting more broadly on rural teacher recruitment. The 75% rural placement outcome, to date, for the 2008 cohort indicates very positive outcomes for this year; however, direct employment outcomes are often difficult to assess because of the vagaries of the appointment process (teachers can apply for rural placements in specific locations, but be placed elsewhere).



Employment intentions provide an alternative outcome measure. In 2008 90% of participants on the field trip indicated their intention to apply for employment in a rural school. Results over four years suggest that the intention to gain employment in a rural area in the future is 73%.

## **CHALLENGES?**

The presentation of positive outcome data is an accurate indication of the outcomes achieved from the Rural Education Field Trip. Preservice teachers have overwhelmingly evaluated the experience as beneficial. Feedback to the question "How would you change this field trip experience?" have primarily included conflicting suggestions about small changes to the itinerary, reflecting personal preferences, the addition of more "free time", access to more information about their teaching assignments prior to the trip or "Nothing!" This feedback has informed small changes to the itinerary over the years.

Of course, the fleeting nature of the interactions and the short time spent at each location create an artificial situation which may not accurately represent the experience of sustained relocation in the communities. As one respondent noted, "we ought to remember that both parties were playing the meet and greet game"; however, the limitation of the 'drop in drop out' structure of the trip is balanced by the exposure to diversity which is not afforded to preservice teachers in a single rural placement.

The greatest challenge with the field trip is that surprisingly, its value has yet to be recognised by the Department of Education through the provision of any financial support. As with many effective learning experiences, the ability to offer the trip relies on a continual search for philanthropic supporters and the generosity of school communities. Extension of data collection in a systematic way to other stakeholders may provide further evidence of the positive outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

The rural education field trip has been a highly successful means for exposing preservice teachers to a diversity of rural educational contexts, giving them first-hand experience of schools, students, teachers and rural communities. The trip provides them with an opportunity to become familiar with the unknown, allowing them to overcome anxieties and develop confidence in their skills and abilities as rural teachers. It provides an alternative opportunity for preservice teachers who are unable to commit to an extended absence from work or family commitments. The trip represents opportunities for preservice teachers to engage with rural and particularly indigenous students, developing their cultural awareness and understanding of rural and indigenous education issues in context. The learning for all people associated with the rural education field trip and the requests for return visits make me entirely committed to the importance of this opportunity for all stakeholders and the need to extend this opportunity to others.

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