RECRUITING AND RETAINING TEACHERS IN RURAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM A RURAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

While the Department of Education in South Africa has instituted structural measures to attract the newly qualified teachers in rural schools, these measures have had limited success. This article reports on the changed perceptions on teaching in rural schools of thirty student teachers who participated in a three week rural teaching experience program. Our findings suggest that student teachers who do practicum in rural schools develop a greater appreciation of rurality and are more likely to respond positively to an appointment to teach in rural schools. This study concludes that exposure through a rural practicum could be significant in attracting qualified teachers in rural schools, where these teachers are needed most.

Key words: Rural education, rural teaching experience, teacher education, South Africa

BACKGROUND

My personal memoir as a school principal in a rural high school is worth recounting as it offers some insights into the challenges that rural schools face in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers.

> *My school was located about 120km away from the nearest urban area, and about 10km of gravel road off the main tarred road. There was no public transport from the main road to the school and teachers had to walk a distance of 10 km on foot in order to get to the school. I spent 8 years as a principal in this school. Over the years there were as many new teachers coming to the school as those who were leaving. I received many applications to transfer and also to resign especially from the newly employed teachers in the school. Those who remained usually did so against their desire. Essentially, the school had huge problems in recruiting and retaining teachers.*

Schools in rural provinces in South Africa appear to have huge challenges in attracting and retaining newly qualified graduates (Mulkeen, 2005). In a recent survey, Maringe, Masinire, and Nkambule, 2014 estimated that two per cent of primary school teachers in one of the rural provinces in South Africa were aged between 20-25 years[i]. They attribute the low uptake of rural teaching posts by newly qualified young graduates to the unattractiveness of the rural province. Twenty years after the demise of apartheid[ii], which has largely been implicated in the geographical and racial inequalities in the development of rural provinces as compared urban provinces in South Africa, there are no major improvements in the conditions of those communities that have been disadvantaged by the apartheid system. The South African problem of qualified teachers in rural schools seems to parallel regional and international trends.

For many newly qualified professionals, including teachers, working in rural schools is accepted with aversion (Adedeji & Olaniyan, 2011; Boylan & Bandy, 1994). This is largely because of the assumed social and professional problems associated with working in a rural context. In South Africa the

Department of Education (DoE) has instituted structural measures to attract the newly qualified and to retain those already appointed in rural schools. As will be explained later, these measures have had limited success because they are introduced as reactive measures to combat the problem of teacher shortage. What has been rarely explored is a rethinking of the place of teacher education in alleviating the shortage of qualified teachers in rural schools.

This paper reports on the changed understandings of rurality of a group of student teachers after they had participated in a rural teaching experience programme. The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, an overview of the problem of attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools and current attempts to address the problem is presented. Secondly, literature pertaining to current initial teacher education programs in relation to rural education and preparing student teachers to teach in rural schools in particular is reviewed. Thirdly, a description of a rural teaching experience (RTE) programme which was developed and implemented is given. Finally, practical and theoretical insights are suggested for teacher educators that maybe useful for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools

Lack of access to services available in the urban areas is often cited as an obstacle to the recruitment and retaining of teachers in remote rural schools. In the above memoir, physical accessibility and transport are problems in some rural places. Not only do rural teachers struggle to access social services, but they are also professionally isolated. For example, Collins (1999) and Appleton (1998) maintain that geographic and professional isolation are some of the reasons why teachers abandon rural appointments. Other reasons that have been noted include, lack of resources, isolation from family, cultural barriers and professional burnout (Sharplin, 2002; Handal et al., 2013). Also diminished social and professional status triggers disdain for rural appointments (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; McClure, Redfield, & Hammer, 2003).

In South Africa, the Department of Education (2005) and Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) describe the problem of teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools as part of a broader social development challenge facing rural communities. They argue that lack of basic social services such as provision of adequate infrastructure, water, electricity, roads and clinics impact on the improvement and provision of quality education in rural schools. Some problems are also perceived as related. For example, shortage of resources such as textbooks, classroom space, and professional support also negatively affect the professional image of rural teachers.

Perceptions of rurality and the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools

While some of the above problems that impact on the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas are real, this paper argues that some of the problems result from stereotypical imaginations that arise from misconceptions about rural communities and about rural schools in particular. For example, Theobold and Wood (2010) illustrate how such stereotypical perceptions of rurality among both rural learners and teachers become an entrenched part of their reality and identity. Theobold and Wood argue further that the public media and education institutions, through their curricula, have contributed largely to the propagation of these negative perceptions of rurality. Similarly, Corbett (2007) has shown how the rural place is persistently erased in education thought, policy, curriculum and pedagogic practices. Such stereotypical thinking about rural schools, learners and teachers among student teachers requires systematic interruption, at initial teacher education level.

In South Africa notions of rurality have been based on common sense empathy and 'Othering' (Balfour, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2008). Such rural notions depict the rural in the negative sense with a homogenizing power. Isolation, disease, poverty, corruption, traditionalism, conservatism and entropy are all synonymous with rural places. Such distressing discourses in relation to rural life are at worst disempowering, especially for those teachers who dare to work in rural schools.

In the historic-political context in South Africa, rural areas were a product of the colonial and apartheid economic structure where poverty and unemployment was a mechanism employed to drive out all able-bodied men to seek employment in the urban industrial places. In this sense the rural functioned as an organ that feeds into the 'national economic and capital interests' (Cloke, 2006)

but at the prize of rural development. The economic and functional perspective of rurality still dominates South Africa.

In the realm of education, Corbett (2007) has argued that successful graduates from rural areas are not absorbed in the rural development strategies, but are quickly integrated into the urban politico-economic system. In Corbett's study, success in schooling is associated with moving out of the rural community. The urban has its attractions, particularly for those who are coming from rural areas. How may those who come from rural areas to pursue higher education in urban areas be motivated to return? This question becomes pertinent, particularly when higher education programs appear to alienate these students from their rural connections. What role can teacher education institutions play in addressing the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools?

This study explored the perceptions of students who had participated in a rural teaching practicum. A key question of the study was whether these student teachers had a different opinion about working in rural schools to those they had before they had participated in the RTE. The study also sought to establish whether the RTE had any influence on the student teachers' willingness to work in rural schools after completing their professional training.

Theorizing teacher recruitment and retention in rural schools

Attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals to work in rural areas is an international problem (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe, & Noonan, 2004; Wallace & Boylan, 2008; Trinidad, Sharplin, Lock, Ledger, Boyd, & Terry, 2010). Handal, Watson, Petocz and Maher (2013) explained the factors that impact on teacher retention in rural schools by grouping them into three major categories: professional, organizational and personal. These factors, they argued, *develop a working environment that promoted teacher attrition fuelled by professional burnout* (Handal et al., 2013, p. 23). They suggest that creative use of contemporary technology, such as online media, could be harnessed to compensate for geographic distance and promote a supportive professional community. It is important to note that in Australia the 'transfer point system' has been used as a measure to temporarily attract and recruit teachers to rural and remote schools.

In South Africa, teacher shortage in rural schools remains the biggest challenge in regard to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (DoE, 2005; Kabungaidze, Mahlatshana, & Ngirange, 2013). This is largely because of a huge disparity between rural and urban contexts in terms of teacher provision. Mulkeen (2005) has argued that a solution to the supply of teachers in rural schools does not reside in training more teachers because there is an oversupply of teachers in urban schools. What is required is to think of innovative ways of enticing teachers in the urban areas to relocate to rural schools and those who are graduating to seek employment in the rural schools. Given some of the professional, personal and organizational factors outlined, rural schools largely remain unattractive places for those teachers seeking employment, even for the first time in their careers.

To address the rural teacher shortage, a number of strategies have been suggested including, onsite professional induction of the newly appointed, practical internships, increased student intake in teacher education programmes through means of financial assistance, (for example, contract bursaries), media rural recruitment campaigns, and financial incentives (DoE, 2005). From both local and international literature, it can be surmised that efforts aimed at addressing teacher recruitment and retention have basically focused on those teachers who have already graduated.

This paper acknowledges the significance and impacts of measures taken by the Department of Education in South Africa to address teacher shortage in rural schools but also argues that the problem is more complex and requires collaborative and holistic efforts among stakeholders including teacher education institutions. As such, the problem should be thought of beyond the current structural, quick-fix, and short-term approaches. Rather these efforts should be complemented by pre-service teacher education programmes that reorient the perceptions of beginning teachers to appreciate the possibility of working in rural schools.

Initial teacher education and the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools

This paper argues that in South Africa teacher education institutions have not taken proactive measures that attend to rural education challenges, more specifically, the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools because they work with a framework of teacher education that is

essentially 'metro-centric' (Barter, 2008). For example, Islam (2012) cites the lack of relevance, complete omission, misrecognition of rural-urban disparity, and disconnection between university courses on educational theory and the rural school practices. Similarly, in an analysis of pre-service education programmes in Australia, Boylan (2004) describes the situation with regards to rural education as being 'piece-meal' with no evidence of rural education or rural practicum in the modules.

However, at present in Australia, the role of teacher education institutions in complementing the department of education to recruit and retain qualified teachers through the preparation of teachers for rural, remote and regional places has significantly increased. Such programs as the Rural Teacher Education Project, the Renewing Rural Teacher Education (Trinidad, Sharplin, Lock, Ledger, Boyd, & Terry, 2010; White & Kline, 2012) are borne out of the recognition of the role that teacher education programs might take in preparing teachers for rural locations and hard to staff contexts. According to Trinidad et al. (2010) these projects call for the need to reconceptualise pre-service teacher education so that they are able to prepare teachers for non-metropolitan locations. The aim of these programs is to institutionalise rural practicum and onsite curriculum modules within teacher education departments.

In South Africa rural teaching experience and theorization of rural school practices and policies is still marginal to teacher education curriculum and research. While the significance of incorporating rural understanding in teacher education is acknowledged by both the Department of Education (Gardiner, 2008) and researchers in South Africa (Brown, 2008; Moletsane, 2012) few concrete steps have been taken by higher education institutions. Work in this direction is however, emerging in a few institutions (Mukeredzi, 2013; Islam, 2010).

Largely, there is a thinking that invokes a universalizing tendency in its application that posits that what applies in urban locations works equally well in rural school contexts. Such thinking seems to be driven by the desire to 'urbanise the rural' (Cloke, 2006).

Emerging work in education policy in South Africa, disputes the effectiveness of homogenizing policies which are developed from urban practices and which ignore the idiosyncrasies of rural locations in their formulation and implementation (Maringe, Masinire, & Nkambule, forthcoming). In the context of rural teacher shortage in South Africa, it becomes critical to imagine beyond current metro-based teacher education practices and locate teacher preparation as a key player in the recruitment and retention of teachers. Such imagination calls for a transformation of the current model of preparing teachers.

By foregrounding the significance of preparing teachers to teach in rural schools as a strategy to addressing the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers in such schools, it is the intention of this paper to highlight the potential this strategy has in reorienting student teachers' perceptions about rurality and teaching in rural schools. At the same time the paper invites discussions around the role of teacher education institutions in rural education issues, especially the attraction and retention of qualified teachers in rural schools.

Teaching experience and the rural teacher recruitment problem

A growing body of international scholarship on attracting teachers to rural schools shows that more positive attitudes toward rural and regional appointments result from a professional experience in these areas (Boylan, 2004; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Kline, White, & Locke, 2013). For example, Kline, et al. (2013) argue that rural practicum appears to foster positive attitudes on graduate teachers in taking up a rural appointment. Such attitudes evolve from collaboration between rural communities, educators and universities during rural and regional professional experience. In Australia, the Renewing Regional and Rural Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) (2008-2011) is a nationally coordinated attempt designed to address the problem of teacher shortage in remote and regional rural schools through concerted pre-service teacher preparation (White & Kline, 2012).

According to White and Kline (2012) teacher education institutions need to expose pre-service teachers to: the significant issues relevant to rural, regional and remote education; a broad representation of rural, regional and remote contexts, assisting pre-service teachers to become familiar with the diversity of rural, regional and remote locations and communities; and a range of potential experiences. Ideally, pre-service teachers need direct personal experience of rural, regional and remote education in context (Sharplin, 2002). Exposure of this nature may be available through

deliberate modules that expound on the above themes and also through professional experience in rural schools.

This study reports on the changed perceptions and attitudes towards working in rural schools of a group of student teachers after they had participated in a rural teaching experience programme. The study sought to understand whether exposure through a rural practicum could influence student teachers to think positively about rural schools and working in rural schools. The study considered student teachers' perception of working in rural school contexts in relation to the professional, organizational and social factors that push qualified teachers out of these rural schools.

METHODOLOGY

The Participants

The participants in this study comprised of thirty student teachers who were selected to carry out their teaching experience in the rural schools. The sample was purposefully selected from a population of about nine hundred and fifty second and third year Bachelor of Education students. Further criterion for selection was that students had to specialise in either History, Geography and English subjects which the researchers could supervise during their teaching practice. The selection process also took into account participants' geographical background. Thus a balance was achieved in terms of participants who had lived in rural and urban locations.

The selected students had to commit to participation in a three-week RTE. The Teaching Experience (TE) provides a practical component of the Bachelor of Education program. In the main, student teachers are despatched into the urban schools close to where the university is located. In 2013, the first RTE was proposed and implemented and this study was carried out to explore how the RTE impacted on selected student teachers' thinking about working in rural schools.

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The RTE was designed to provide an opportunity that allowed the student teachers to understand the opportunities and challenges of teaching in a rural context. The RTE had distinct phases which were significant sources of data that was used to answer the question; Does participating in RTE alter student teachers' conceptions of rural places and thinking about working in rural schools? In order to answer this question, this study obtained data about student teachers' ideas before participating in the program and also their thinking during and after the RTE.

Firstly, interested student teachers were required to explain why they wanted to join the RTE. In explaining their intentions the study aimed to get a sense of their perceptions of teaching in rural schools. This was further elaborated in the induction sessions which the student teachers participated in before they went to the rural schools. In these sessions student teachers were introduced to theoretical discussions of rurality. The purpose was to demystify some of the normative understandings of rural schools, rural learners and rural communities, which some literature suggests has a lot do with teachers' distaste of working in rural schools. In a sense, they were introduced to the concept of diverse ruralities. The student teachers were also made aware of some of the challenges that confront rural communities and how best they could prepare themselves for these conditions. The opportunities to learn, and the social, professional, and collegial support available for student teachers were outlined. Usually the sessions engendered high expectations in the student teachers.

Secondly, student teachers were deployed into rural schools. In the rural schools they interacted with learners, teachers and parents. They also interacted amongst themselves. They were also supervised in the schools with the assistance of school-based educators. Finally, data was collected through formal and group reflective sessions during which the student teachers shared their experiences. From these reflective sessions detailed descriptive data about student teachers' thinking about how RTE had impacted them were generated. Data was categorised and analysed in relation to the three major research questions: What student teachers thought about working in rural areas before participating in the RTE? What student teachers thought about rural schools and working there during their RTE? and, lastly, What they thought about working in rural schools after the RTE?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Emerging Themes

In analysing the data, the following themes emerged: potential to make positive change and being acknowledged; diverse ruralities; opportunities for professional growth and autonomy which urban TE did not provide; and working and learning from other student teachers. The above themes will be elaborated in the sections that follow.

Student teachers' ideas of the rural context before the RTE

For those student teachers who had studied and done their previous TE in urban schools, their perceptions in this study illustrate how the RTE exposure influenced their thinking about teaching in rural schools and whether they would consider the possibility of teaching in rural schools. For those students who had lived and studied in urban schools, they saw rural schools as places to be transformed to become like urban places which they were familiar with. They saw themselves as agents of transformation who sought to make a difference in the lives of rural learners. As one student said, *…I wish to share the knowledge that I have gained in my lectures and tutorials with the rural learners and teachers who desperately need this knowledge.* Axioms such as, *…we know that rural schools are…* often proceeded to describe the rural places in terms of their assumed social, cultural-capital, and economic deficiencies. Such descriptions were not informed by factual knowledge of rural schools, but by fictitious understanding which disappeared as soon as student teachers arrived into the rural schools. For example, one student said, *…I thought we are going into deep rural areas where schools operate under trees, with village round huts made of mud and thatched with grass.* Such a statement seems to suggest that some student teachers had negative and stereotypical notions of the rural place. White and Kline (2012) propose among other things that student teachers need to be exposed to understandings of diverse ruralities. Knowing that there are diverse ruralities and also the experience of being in a rural place, are important for dismantling normative notions of rural places. This study argues that this RTE provides key moments for the disruption of such negative misconceptions. Swanson (2012) argues that field experience is a place for cultivating perception and student teachers are challenged to go beyond their initial perceptions.

What also emerged in the motivation for joining the RTE from students who had moved to university from rural areas is a re-ignition of their passionate desire to work in rural areas which had been thwarted by successive inductions into education theory and practice that was metro-oriented. One student teacher had this to say:

> *…when I came to (Name of Institution) three years ago, my aim was that as soon as I finish the course I will go back and teach in my rural community. But as each year passes, I feel disconnected from my rural background and even the desire to go back has faded, there is no mention what so ever in the courses that we do, about how to teach in rural areas. I feel like I won't be able to survive there as a teacher. I am better equipped to teach in urban private schools in (Name of City). All my friends look down upon me once I mention that it's better to go back to teach in our rural homes because that is where our knowledge is most needed. When I heard about the RTE, I thought at least this is the opportunity that I have dreamt for, to experience teaching in rural schools. I am happy about this opportunity. I think it will revive my desire to go back after my B.Ed degree.*

The above statement implicates teacher education programmes in the recruitment of qualified teachers in rural schools. Firstly, there is an erasure of the thought of working in rural schools through omission of how teaching in these places can be done. Teacher education courses are also silent about the rural, resulting in a disconnection of students with their original desire to return and teach in rural schools. As attested by Corbett (2007) and Theobold and Wood (2010), identification with the rural is erased in most of curriculum theory and practice. At the same time, the statement brings to the centre the role that teacher education might play through the RTE in reviving student-teachers desire to go back.

There was desire among students to deal with challenges of working in under-resourced schools in rural areas. They consider themselves as having been trained to teach in adequately resourced schools in urban schools. *I would want to see how creative I would be to teach in schools that have no wall charts, libraries and smart boards.* There was a sense of adventure and desire to venture into the unknown among the student teachers. For example, one of the students later said, *…if only I knew before that this is what I was dragging myself into, I would not have come.* Often, the romantic views which student

teachers had disappeared immediately when they encountered the unexpected reality of working in rural and challenging contexts. Teachers, who begin to work in rural schools with these ideas, may be more likely to despair and resign. The RTE program may induct student teachers into the realities of rural schools and the challenges that they are likely to meet there.

Moments of professional growth in rural schools during RTE

Literature about teacher recruitment in rural schools has often identified limited resources as a factor that influences teachers' decision to abandon an appointment in the rural areas (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). Working in schools that have no adequate resources does not bring professional satisfaction for the teachers. In many ways they found their effectiveness to deliver quality teaching compromised by a shortage of resources.

Teachers in rural areas are also reported as complaining about distance from professional specialist support which is easily accessible in urban areas (Appleton, 1998). In our study, students encountered similar problems of limited resources and lack of professional support. As one student teacher reported in her reflective journal:

> …*this is by far the most under resourced school I have been to, there are no adequate textbooks for learners, not enough desks and chairs and four learners share a desk that is meant for two learners and the classes are overcrowded.*

In this study some student teachers perceived the challenge of shortage of resources in a positive way. They had to imagine creative ways of working effectively in classes with a shortage of resources. For these students teaching in rural schools and knowing that there are limited resources was a professionally stimulating challenge because, as one student commented:

> *I am able to grow as a student teacher. I use my own creativity to try to think of the best way to teach using the little resources that are available. I learnt that you can make the best of every little thing you have. I also learnt that it is important not to be close minded because our minds can change learners' minds too.*

What emerges from student teachers' comments is that, in a context of limited resources one has to think about how to design group work and individual work. This study attributes student teachers' positive thinking about working in under-resourced schools in rural areas to the nature of our RTE which is organised around focused group reflections of encountered challenges. The opportunity to talk about these problems and about alternative strategies to circumvent these challenges, in a coordinated group environment rather than trying to deal with the challenge individually, should be thought of as an empowering model of the RTE. Often teachers are left to deal with these challenges alone. That kind of isolation in the face of challenges can be disempowering.

Attempts to address the problem of resources have often revolved around reducing class sizes and securing more desks or books. Ideally, these are good proposals to eradicate the challenges. In this study the pedagogical improvisations that student teachers suggest are important in a context where material resources seem not to be available in the immediate future. Also, realising that these challenges present moments that can be capitalized to develop pedagogical skills is also important. However, some of the student teachers felt hopeless under these conditions.

The RTE also provided student teachers with an opportunity to compare their previous experience in the urban schools with the subsequent experience in a rural school. In the urban schools, supervising teachers tended to over protect their classes from the student teachers. The student teachers were assigned topics that had been taught before by their urban supervising teachers. Student teachers reported that, urban supervising teachers perceive them as having very little to offer during their teaching experience. In such cases, they reported that it was difficult to assess their professional growth because of not being allowed to teach 'a normal class'. If learners showed understanding, it could not be attributed to their effort, because these learners would have been taught the topic before.

However, in the rural schools, student teachers reported being assigned to teach topics which the supervising teachers were not competent to teach. The participants considered the RTE as a real teaching experience where their growth as professionals was tested. However, the researchers were concerned by the lack of adequate professional support given to the student teachers by the supervising school mentors (Masinire & Nkambule, forthcoming). To compensate for this shortfall,

the researchers had to ensure that they, as university supervisors, provided more support to the student teachers. Also student teachers learnt a great deal from their colleagues.

Developing an informed knowledge of rurality

Rural places are often depicted as replete with impenetrable physical barriers which make accessibility extremely difficult. Schools in these places are also presented as far apart, where learners travel long distances to and from schools (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). While this might be true for some rural places it cannot be generalized to all rural contexts. For some student teachers in this study, they were shocked to realise that many schools around the area were geographically close to each other. Learners did not have to walk long distances to get to their school. In instances where learners had to travel long distances they did so because of choice rather than by circumstances.

On the first day student teachers reported moments of trepidation and anxiety because of not knowing what to expect. Such fear, we assume, derived from mental imaginations of rurality which they had heard from colleagues and from the public media. In most cases, their knowledge about the rural place was stereotypical. Evidence from two student teachers' journals below, adequately capture these misconceptions and the fear it induced into them:

> *…as I take my shower in the morning I am filled with trepidation, I wonder what awaits me, I keep running over the appropriate phrases of greeting the learners, my real worry was, will they understand English…*

Such anxiety arose from the thinking that rural learners cannot speak in English. Thus the student teacher was rehearsing the most simplified phrases that she would utter to the learners on arrival.

Another student teacher reported her impression of the school as she waited outside and the expectations it aroused:

> *…I could hardly read the words that marked the school motto which were on the sign board close to the gate where I was standing, which were as faint and worn out as the paint on the walls of the building, I went into panic because I didn't know what to expect in the rest of the school.*

The above school was a typical rural school with signs of neglect that is often depicted in newspapers and the internet. But it was not the only type of school. Some schools were completely different.

Some student teachers had particular notions of rural schools which dissipated gradually upon arrival into the rural community and after going into the school on the first day, for example:

> *It was a completely different rural from the one I imagine, the school is a typical rural school although it is not as bad as I expected. Surprise is the real word! I didn't expect a deep rural place where people are very poor with no proper schools. It was actually not like that and schools were not as bad as I had thought, there was one school with white teachers and learners.*

The above statements from student teachers show that their expectations were filled with fear. These were some of the fears that the RTE was supposed to allay. During group reflections, student teachers shared their experiences and fears and how they practically dealt with the fears. In most cases things were not as bad as they thought. Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay and Moletsane (2011) attest that, in-depth knowledge of rurality will contribute to changing and challenging deficit, negative and biased understandings to a greater awareness about rurality and its impact on policy formulation. In case of student teachers, greater awareness will impact on their practical decisions to work in the rural schools.

Desire to teach in rural areas

This study also sought to understand whether the RTE had influence on student teachers' decisions to teach in rural schools upon graduation. It was this study's assumption that being there in the rural schools would make student teachers understand what it means to be a teacher working in a rural context and make choices from an informed position. The participants were asked what their thinking was in relation to taking up a rural teaching appointment.

Some student teachers said that the experience shifted their whole way of thinking about the rural schools and working there. One student teacher commented as follows:

> *….from what I experienced during the three weeks, I would consider to return and teach in the rural areas when I am done with my degree. I will be honoured to extend my skills and serve my people, people who are in dire need of my expertise."*

While the students teachers saw and experienced obstacles to teaching in rural schools, they viewed this not as a hindrance but an opportunity. Some saw the challenges within the context of the broader social order. As one student said:

> *…the teaching experience has opened my eyes and reaffirmed my prior theoretical knowledge that education systems can reproduce the inequalities that exist in our society and that the poor learners are subjected to dehumanising existence. It is sad to note that a grade 9 learner is not able to read or to construct a sentence that expresses an idea or opinion. I cherish this rural TE in my heart, the situation might be sad and troubling but I do believe that there is hidden potential that is waiting to be cultivating…*

From the above, three observations might have been fundamental in student teachers' thinking about working in rural schools in future. Firstly, there is recognition that their expertise is most needed in the rural schools. Secondly, there is the social justice imperative to be transformative agents in the rural schools, given the observation that rural learners are at the fringes of receiving a quality education that may improve their life chances. Thirdly there was the latent potential for growth that some student teachers observed in the crevices of obstacles.

The fact that such positive attitudes to working in rural areas could be sustained long after the RTE cannot be ascertained at this point. However, it may be claimed that RTE did ignite student teachers' desire to work in rural schools, especially, those whose desire to return was fading away as a result of exposure to urban learning and urban teaching experience environments.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the place of teacher education institutions in addressing the problem of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in rural in South Africa. This is in line with emerging research locally and internationally that is suggesting that pre-service education programs, particularly rural teaching experience may play a crucial role in re-orienting student teachers towards seeking work rural schools. Specifically, the study focused on the student teachers' perceptions of taking an appointment in rural schools after undergoing through a RTE.

Findings suggest three issues; a) that student teachers who participated in the RTE had preconceived notions of rural schools, b) student teachers gained an informed understanding of the rural contexts after participating in a RTE program that changed their perception of rural schools and, c) student teachers perceived taking a rural appointment after graduating as a career possibility.

In relation to prior ideas about rural schools, participants saw rural places as deficient, with schools operating under trees with the barest minimum resources. With the perception of rural schools as deficient, student teachers who had spent most of their life in urban areas regarded their presence in rural schools as change agents. The rural place and school were seen by student teachers as providing an opportunity for them to work, try their skills and having a lasting impact. For student teachers in this study, the rural schools and their associated problems were seen as attractions rather than places to be avoided. Literature seems to suggest that teachers are repelled by the challenges and therefore never imagine going to work there (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). Given the desire by student teachers to venture into the challenges of rural schools, they required informed understanding of what it was really going to be when they get there and also professional and social support when they arrived. This support was provided through pre-departure induction sessions and also through collegial group reflections where students shared their common experiences and challenges.

In relation to the actual realities of the rural schools, the RTE provided student teachers with opportunities to perceive differently what they had thought about rural schools before they arrived. White and Klein (2012) suggest that student teachers should be aware of a broad representation of rural, regional and remote contexts. During the RTE student teachers observed that, the distance between schools was not far apart, rural learners could communicate in English, and, in one school there were white teachers and learners. In another incident student teachers were surprised by how some learners were critical of how their lack of achievement in Mathematics could jeopardise her chances of pursuing further studies. To imagine that rural learners could have such dreams, unsettled the thinking of student teachers. At the nearby service centre, there were banks, a pharmacy,

Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), and most of the retail shops found in the city. The concept of diverse or multiple ruralities (Cloke, 2006) is helpful in understanding that rural places are not just physical geographical contexts that are the same, but are places that are inhabited by people who interact with them (Nkambule, Balfour, Pillay, & Molestane, 2011).

In relation to the desire to work in rural schools, the student teachers who had come from rural communities reported a revived desire to go and work in rural schools after graduation. However, the fact that theoretical courses did not address issues of how to teach in rural schools was troubling and alienating for these student teachers. On the other hand those student teachers who had lived in urban areas also wanted to teach in rural schools because they considered it a social responsibility.

In relation to professional development, the RTE was seen as an opportunity where actual professional growth of a teacher could be tested. They taught 'natural classes' where learners heard the topic for the first time. This was in contrast to their experiences in the urban schools where school educators did not entrust students with the complete control of the class. Also teaching in a context of limited resources invited the creativity and imagination of the student teachers. This was made possible by working as a team, sharing ideas and also knowing that the challenges were not unique.

The findings of this study have a number of implications for pre-service teacher education development in terms of the problem of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural school context. Firstly, the findings suggest that there is a need to locate the challenge of the solution to the shortage of qualified teachers in rural schools in teacher education institutions. Theobold and Wood (2010) argue that an anti-rural bias is frequently found in texts used in teacher education programs and this usually comes about as omissions. Without exposure to rural schools student teachers develop identities and identification with the urban. The fact that student teachers can develop positive rural attitudes and identities during a RTE suggests teacher education programs should be designed so that they engender those attitudes and identities. As also suggested by Kline, et al. (2013), a rural practicum appears to foster positive attitudes on graduate teachers in taking up a rural appointment.

School based educators' experience and effectiveness also suggest that alternative ways of student teacher mentoring during the RTE requires re-examination. For example, peer student teacher support structures that enable discussion of challenges and how to deal with these challenges could be important. The school-based supervising teachers present professional compromises in terms of the quality of supervision they provided to student teachers. This study partly accepts these compromises as reflecting the unique characteristics of rural schools and what this might mean in terms of preparing teachers in and for rural school contexts. To respond to the above compromise, university tutors might need to support their student teachers more than they do in urban schools.

The RTE provides initial insights into the possibilities and challenges of thinking about how to incite positive attitudes among pre-service teachers to consider working in rural school upon graduation. However, attitudes and perceptions change over time. There is no guarantee that the positive attitudes to rural appointment shown by this group of student teachers will linger in their imagination until they graduate. What this therefore implies, is that there should be other pre-service teacher education structures, modules and experiences in teacher education programs to complement and sustain the positive attitudes developed during the RTE program. Thus, the RTE should be thought of in terms of the broad scheme of pre-service teacher education development for rural schools.

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Primary school staff age profile

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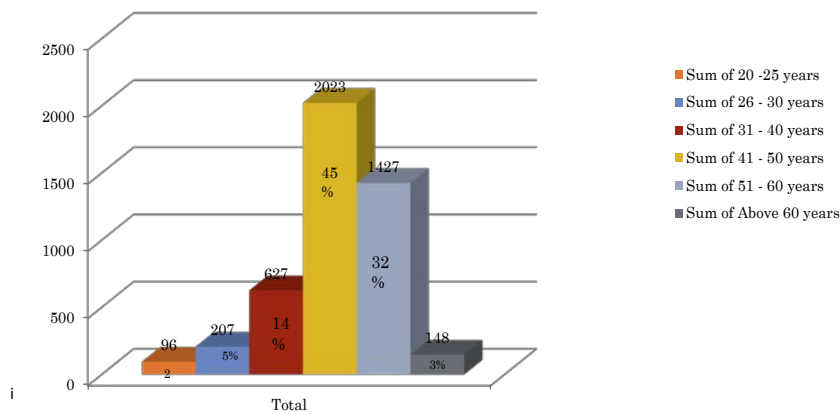
ii Apartheid was a deliberate policy of racial segregation that ensured that Black communities were treated differently than white community in terms of development and delivery of social goods and services.