PREPARING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS FOR RURAL APPOINTMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers need to be prepared to teach in both rural and urban contexts. Preparation to teach multi-grade classes in rural schools is excellent preparation for teaching any class, including urban single-grade classes. Based on our previous research and experience, we designed a unit to prepare our pre-service teachers for the issues they may face in their employment and especially in rural schools, including multi-grade teaching, coping with isolation, working as a casual teacher, and communicating with parents and caregivers. There are significant issues that are distinct in rural and urban contexts, including how metrocentric departmental policies can emphasise the rural/urban divide.

Key words: multi-grade teaching, isolation, communicating with parents, preparing for the rural context

INTRODUCTION

The majority of pre-service teachers in Australia are from a metropolitan background. Teachers who take up appointments in remote locations often find their new environment very alien, sometimes threatening and nearly always extremely isolated. Teachers who intend to work in remote locations need to prepare themselves for this experience (TERRR Network Team, 2013, p. 1, Teacher Guide Overview).

The same statements are true, though perhaps to a lesser extent, for teaching in (relatively less isolated) rural areas. In our regional university, the University of New England, students enrolled in on-campus mode in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) largely come from rural and regional areas, as do many of our off-campus students. Many do their professional experience (pracs) in rural areas where they usually have friends or relatives they can stay with, and many will begin their teaching career in rural areas. It is therefore imperative that they are prepared to teach in these areas that have *restricted access to familiar comforts* (Austin, 2010, p. 3) and at the very least that they are introduced to the issues they will find in rural schools.

It is our contention that such preparation is not only valuable for teaching in rural schools but, rather, is excellent preparation for teaching in any school. Securing a teaching position in a rural school should definitely not be interpreted as some sort of 'second best' or deficit appointment. While some issues are only likely to be applicable to rural and particularly remote areas, many have more widespread relevance. For example, teaching a multi-grade class requires skills in differentiating the curriculum, skills that are relevant in all classrooms; and casual teaching is the likelihood for the majority of our graduates, especially primary teachers, whether they begin their career in rural or urban contexts.

Other issues, such as the importance of support networks and communicating with parents, may be more pertinent, or manifest differently in rural areas, but are still important in urban areas. Finally, there are issues which apply particularly to rural and remote teachers, although being aware of them should not be restricted to these teachers only. An example from our research in small rural schools is that there is often a 'one size fits all' or 'metrocentric' mentality evident in policies and procedures from the Department of Education and Communities (Cornish, 2009b). Better understanding by everyone of the realities of teaching in these small schools could perhaps lead to more enlightened and inclusive expectations and regulations (and to less stress for these teachers).

RESEARCH AIMS AND CONTEXT

This paper reports on a unit that was developed to help address the concern: How can we better prepare pre-service teachers for issues they may face in their employment and especially in rural schools? The need for a unit to address this concern evolved as a response to the findings of two research projects in which we were involved. The Bush Tracks project –both Phase One and Two – comprised a cross discipline collective of academics who initially conducted a survey with early, mid and late career rural teachers. Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants who volunteered to explore the existence, or not, of particular rural pedagogies, as well as opportunities for accelerated leadership in rural schools. Bush Tracks Phase 2 followed this original study and involved the researchers visiting rural/remote schools to shadow and observe the teaching principals of small rural/remote schools while they carried out their daily work. Again, semi- structured interviews were undertaken, this time to identify the nature of teaching principals' work, their concerns and supports. (For further detail about these research projects please refer to the Bush Tracks publication edited by Graham & Miller, 2015).

Based on these research findings and the literature relating to the experiences of teachers in rural locations, a unit of study was designed to address the context, issues and possible responses with a view to equipping pre-service teachers with understandings and strategies relevant to coping with the demands of teaching in a rural context. It is expected that the description of this unit may be of value to other teacher education programs in Australia.

The unit was designed as a core (mandatory) capstone unit in the Bachelor of Education (Primary) to prepare students for the teaching positions they are likely to encounter. The unit, titled The Graduate Teacher, includes the topic areas of rural/remote, multi-grade teaching, social and geographic isolation, casual teaching, communication with parents and caregivers and, ethics and the Code of Conduct. These are organised into four compulsory content modules: Module 1, Rural/remote teaching; Module 2, Casual teaching; Module 3, Communication with parents/caregivers; and Module 4, Teachers' work and culture. In this paper, we discuss the first three modules and their close links to rural/remote teaching (while Module 4 is relevant wherever a teacher may work).

Module 1 was specifically incorporated into the unit to help overcome the reported finding that *pre-service teachers are under-informed about rural and remote teaching* (Sharplin, 2002, p. 49; Beutel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011). As indicated above, we teach in a regional university and many of our students complete a practicum placement in a rural or regional school. Even more of our graduating students obtain their first employment on a casual basis. All teachers must interact with parents and caregivers, and are subject to the same requirements in terms of a Code of Conduct. Similarly, skills learned when simultaneously teaching students in different stages, such as in a rural multi-grade class, are transferable to any diverse classroom context. The four modules are therefore deemed to be highly relevant, both by us and by the students themselves.

MODULE 1: RURAL/REMOTE TEACHING

In this module teacher education students are introduced to some of the issues related to teaching in rural and remote contexts, such as coping with isolation, and to some of the strategies that are useful for multi-grade/multi-stage teaching.

Isolation

Isolation comprises geographic, social and professional isolation, and all three can be relative (rural) or absolute (remote). Gibson (1994) argues that teacher preparation programs must explore the concept of isolation and our agreement with this position means we have included this topic in our capstone unit.

Geographic isolation underlies both social and professional isolation. It can lead to many frustrations, such as limited or difficult access to education support services (e.g., speech pathologists, education psychologists), services that support teaching and learning (e.g., libraries, sporting facilities), ICT infrastructure, career advice, and education role models (TERRR Network Team, 2013, p. 3, Teacher Guide 1). Mutual professional support has been identified as a critical coping strategy (Austin, 2010, p. 25) and pre-service teachers need to realise that if specific mentoring is not provided or available, then they need to be active in setting-up mechanisms to access such support. Geographic isolation can also mean difficulty finding casual teachers to allow for attendance at professional development opportunities, though travelling to attend such opportunities can itself be the main precluding factor. At a more basic level, geographic isolation can also mean lack of ready access to basic necessities — a supermarket, hairdresser and other services, petrol station and, importantly these days, a mobile phone network.

To someone from an urban background, even relative isolation can be problematic. While all types of isolation have an effect on rural teaching (Munsch & Boylan, 2008; Starr & White, 2008), personal and social issues seem to be of more concern to pre-service teachers contemplating a rural appointment (Sharplin, 2002). Difficulty maintaining existing social relationships because of a restricted or non-existent mobile phone network can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, though sometimes more accessible Internet connections to email and social media sites can reduce this isolation.

Of relevance to new teachers in rural areas is the opposite problem related to social issues — that of developing new social networks. Sharplin's research identified pre-service teachers' dominant concern as 'fitting into' the community, a concern that remains current according to feedback we continue to receive from rural teachers. The description of 'living in a fishbowl' (Gibson, 1994), or as Austin (2010, p. 18) describes it, a *dusty fishbowl*, is well-known. Our own research (the Bush Tracks Research Collective) with Teaching Principals in very small rural schools confirms Austin's view that *it is advisable not to get too involved in local politics or community issues* (p. 25). One Teaching Principal, for example, described how she chose volunteer work with the State Emergency Service as her way of contributing to the community because it could not be seen as 'cliquey' in the way that joining some other social groups (such as the tennis club) might have been. Other teachers spoke to us of living in another place if possible, even if only for weekends and holidays, in order to create some distance between school and out-of-school life. This strategy is not without a cost, as it always involves significant travel and the setting-up of two different homes and reduces the opportunities for positive interactions with the local community. But it is one strategy that can be helpful for avoiding some of the potential pitfalls when navigating ways to interact with the community and build social networks while at the same time not being seen to favour one social group over another.

Multi-grade Teaching

Small rural schools rarely have an enrolment large enough to sustain single-grade classes. Multi-grade classes are therefore the norm, ranging from two-grade classes to seven-grade classes (Kindergarten to Year 6). In New South Wales, these classes are likely to be cross-stage as well. It is therefore impossible to 'teach to the middle' in these classes and teachers are forced by circumstances if not by inclination to adopt a more individual focus on student learning (Lloyd, 1999). Planning for all new primary teachers is very time-intensive as they need to become familiar with relevant syllabus documents and plan lessons in all Key Learning Areas (KLAs), but for teachers of multi-grade classes, the planning is even more intensive because it covers different stages and requires detailed knowledge of many more documents.

Of course, teachers in single-grade classes also need to know about syllabus documents for different stages if they are to cater for the range of learning needs in their classes. Most teachers have at least one student in their class who needs to work at a stage above or below the rest of the class in a particular subject area. But these adjustments do not occur for every lesson, every day. To the extent that all teachers do have to face such 'learning adjustments', then learning to program for a multi-grade class is helpful preparation for differentiating the curriculum in every class (Cornish, 2009a).

Strategies that can ease the demands on a rural teacher include both organisational and teaching/learning strategies (Cornish, 2006a, 2006b). Developing classroom routines and encouraging learners to become independent and take responsibility for their own learning are organisational strategies that reduce the necessity for students to rely on the teacher all the time. Incorporating teaching/learning strategies such as integrated curriculum and open-ended activities are ways of reinforcing these goals, as is small-group cooperative learning, where numbers permit. Similarly, fostering peer tutoring has the same result of reducing the demands on a teacher as well as being a beneficial strategy in terms of student learning — it not only encourages 'helping behaviours' (Topping, 2005), but also is beneficial for developing both the tutor's and the tutee's understanding (Lodish, 1992; Topping, 1988; Topping, Peter, Stephen, & Whale, 2004; Vincent, 1999). Integrating curriculum and/or adopting a theme-based approach also help develop student understanding because of their focus on the 'big picture' and less compartmentalising into unrelated activities.

Each of these strategies has a 'learning benefit' — identifying themes and other ways to integrate results in more meaningful and connected learning for students; developing routines leads to a more efficient learning environment; peer tutoring improves students' understanding; encouraging independent learners is essential for learning how to learn and stimulating the development of lifelong learners. In addition to learning advantages, an important benefit for a multi-grade teacher and one that should not be underestimated is workload management. Anything that reduces the demands on a teacher's time is especially helpful in a multi-grade class.

Somewhat paradoxically given the benefits of mixed-age classrooms espoused by many (e.g., Gaustad, 1994; Lester & Constable, 2006; Lodish, 1992; Pratt, 1986), workload can be made more manageable if the class can be taught for at least some of the time as a single class. Whole-class teaching can often be appropriate, even for core subjects such as Science and Technology, 'Social Studies', and some aspects of English. For example, students can often study the same topic in these subject areas, but the teacher would have different expectations in relation to learning outcomes for students in the different grades. All students can be engaged in writing or individual research, or watching an online video or conducting an experiment, but the products of their engagement in the different activities will be different and each student would be assessed against the outcomes appropriate for their stage of learning. Thus curriculum rotation, where units of work are mapped and rotated over a period of two, three, four or more years, allows these units to be taught to the whole class, with or without 'learning adjustments' for individual students. Even with more sequential subjects such as maths or language, a common

introduction and conclusion, with differentiated activities in between, can make multi-stage teaching more manageable in both the planning and teaching phases.

Teacher educators need to support pre-service teachers in gaining not only a realistic but also an impartial view of what it is like to teach in rural schools (Jenkins, Taylor, & Reitano, 2011), as well as how to prepare for and minimise any of the conceivable difficulties that might arise in this situation. Therefore in this module the focus is on rural teaching practice in general, as well as the lived experiences of rural teachers. To achieve this goal, teachers with rural experience are invited to describe the nature of rural teaching from their perspectives, plus how they deal with any issues that arise for them. Lectures are recorded so off-campus students are also able to benefit from these teachers' knowledge and advice. Direct exposure to a rural context for a significant period of time is obviously the best option for introducing pre-service teachers to issues related to these contexts but alternative options such as guest speakers can certainly be beneficial (Sharplin, 2002). The students' questions to these visitors reveal that many of them appreciate the exposure to this aspect of teaching that many of them have not previously thought about.

In workshops and assessment tasks, students explore practical strategies for teaching in a rural school. An emphasis in The Graduate Teacher unit, supported by an assessment task worth 50 per cent, is on planning a series of lessons or a one-day unit of work for a multi-grade class, incorporating individual, small-group and whole-class activities (some differentiated by activity, some differentiated by outcome or expectation) as well as outcomes from several different stages. Such planning skills are also useful for teachers who need to cope with a day's casual teaching in a rural multi-grade classroom, especially when no work or instructions have been left by the normal teacher, and this assignment gives pre-service teachers a resource for their 'grab and go' file.

MODULE 2: CASUAL TEACHING

The majority of beginning primary teachers in NSW commence their careers as casual and/or temporary teachers (Boyd, Harrington, Jones, Kivunja, & Reitano, 2010; Casual Direct DEC, 2012; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009). In fact, over 45,000 teachers in NSW were registered for casual teaching in 2012 (Casual Direct DEC, 2012). Numbers of beginning casual teachers are growing (Casual Direct, 2012; Victorian Auditor General's Office, VAGO, 2012). For example in 2003, 60 per cent of beginning teachers appeared to acquire permanent jobs (Dow, 2003, p. 87). However in 2007, only approximately 22 per cent of beginning teachers from one regional university were able to find permanent work (Boyd et al., 2010). Casual teaching can require *extra skills* (Duggelby & Badali, 2007, p. 23) to those of permanent teachers, as their vocation is uncertain, unstable, marginalising, and often more challenging (Duggelby & Badali, 2007; Jenkins, Smith, & Maxwell, 2009; Lunay & Lock, 2006; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Pietsch & Williamson, 2009).

In reality, casual teachers are *floating populations* (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 66) who fill gaps so that the school day can proceed. Lunay and Lock (2006) discovered after a review of casual teachers in the UK, USA and Australia that they were responsible for up to one year of a student's whole school career K–12. Yet casual teachers and their work go largely unrecognised even though schools could not operate successfully without them (Duggleby & Badali, 2007).

As large numbers of teachers (25–40%) leave the profession within three to five years of beginning their careers (Darling-Hammond, 1990; Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Ramsey, 2000), often because of negative experiences in their early years (Darling-Hammond, 1990; McCormack & Thomas, 2005), the more demanding, less supported and often undervalued role of a casual teacher becomes extremely significant. With little, if any, school-supported induction, mentoring or professional development, these beginning casual teachers are more likely to struggle and become disenchanted and move away from the profession. The quality of teachers' initial teaching experiences can affect their professional fulfilment, how long they stay

within the career, as well as their effectiveness as a teacher (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McCormack & Thomas, 2005; Pietsch, 2011).

The pressures on beginning casual teachers can be immense. There are numerous challenges for any beginning teacher, let alone those who are commencing their career in a casual role. The complications soon arise with how to acquire the first job with little or no systemic support and their growing lack of confidence, which looms if this first job isn't soon forthcoming (Jenkins et al., 2009). The requirements to continually *fit* into a changing workplace, that is, *new schools, routines, teachers' plans and discrete classes* (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 73) are exhausting. Less than supportive relationships with permanent teachers, thus lower expectations of casuals by these staff; the lack of perceived equity by casuals given their intermittent work and lesser conditions; and the lack of professional development, foster sentiments by many casual teachers of being isolated from the profession and the workplace (Lunay & Lock, 2006). Perceiving themselves as being readily exploited (always having to do playground duty), having a lower status than other permanent teachers (Lunay & Lock, 2006), and having additional behaviour management issues (Duggelby & Badali, 2007; McCormack & Thomas, 2005) intensified by the itinerant nature of their work (Jenkins et al., 2009), are only a few of the issues which exist within the working life of a beginning casual teacher. Conversely, the Teaching Principals who were interviewed in the Bush Tracks research described how some rural schools have fewer discipline problems and find it easy to keep their pool of casual teachers; in these cases, principals can cultivate a small but loyal cohort.

Consequently, in The Graduate Teacher unit we have taken the view that we are teaching pre-service teachers to deal with the reality of the present, not the past (Jenkins, 2013), which means that we cannot assume that all primary teachers will be teaching in the same classroom for extended periods of time, such as a term, semester or year. Thus, it is the responsibility of teacher educators to facilitate their exploration of how to teach effectively as casual and/or short-term temporary teachers. This investigation implies: developing effective teaching and preventative behaviour management strategies that are immediately engaging and will prevent inappropriate behaviours from arising; helping to build an immediate level of rapport with the students if possible; discovering a form of support within the school (e.g., the teacher next door, the deputy principal) in case of urgent situations; identifying ways of being mentored by experienced teachers and other casual teachers that don't rely on the formal school system; plus gaining professional development in order to meet accreditation purposes without it being too expensive in time and cost, especially considering the intermittent payment of casual teachers.

Although both urban and rural schools regularly require casual teachers, issues surrounding them can be similar, as well as distinct. In urban schools, there is usually a ready supply of casual teachers from which to choose, although this might vary in 'hard to staff' areas. However, for teachers in rural areas, accessing casual teachers can often be fraught as, depending on the rural area, casual teachers can be in scarce supply. A regular teacher is sometimes away from school owing to ill health, periods of leave or in some cases to access professional development. The latter reason can appear a bittersweet circumstance for a casual teacher. The positive aspect is that the casual teacher gains work while the teacher is involved in professional development; however the casual teacher doesn't have the same opportunities for professional development unless it is run out of school time and within easy access and at a reasonable cost, important considerations for someone with uncertain income and employment opportunities.

Accordingly, casual teachers, both those who have since found permanent employment and those who are still dealing with periodic work, are invited to address pre-service teachers and discuss with them how they gained work, professional support and mentorship, helpful and engaging teaching strategies, useful resources (hard copy and internet links), plus the rewards of what can be a challenging job. Such rewards include a pathway to permanent work, and broader experience gained from entry into a wide range of classrooms with the resulting advantages of the professional learning opportunities such situations afford. The students share internet resources and showcase strategies that they judge to be useful and suitable for casual teaching,

as well as produce an assessment item, as mentioned above, based on a one-day, thematic plan for a casual day's teaching in a multi-grade rural school. These relevant hard copy and internet resources are also identified and collected on an Edmodo site (a safe space for a class or specific cohort to share and interact), which can be accessed by this particular cohort of pre-service teachers when they leave the university and begin their teaching careers either as a casual, temporary or permanent teacher. All the pre-service teachers contribute to this shared space and explain how and why this resource would prove suitable, in particular, for casual teaching.

There is a great need in many rural areas for a supply of casual teachers. Combined with the module on teaching in rural schools, including pedagogical practices for multi-grade teaching, we hope that at least some students are willing to overcome their previous reluctance and accept a position in a rural school; and if they do, we hope we have helped to minimise the potential culture shock that many beginning teachers encounter in rural schools. Furthermore, we hope those pre-service teachers who manage to secure more permanent work will be more likely to welcome, support and value casual teachers more as 'invited' teachers who have a significant job to do under challenging circumstances.

We see these two modules, on rural/remote and casual teaching, as fundamental to pre-service teacher preparation. In their anonymous evaluations, students agree. They confirm the need for pre-service learning about the issues related to their likely teaching career, and their probable casual teaching experience. Some examples of typical feedback from students, 36 per cent of whom typically complete an online unit evaluation, are presented below:

> This unit is very practical. I found that even though I am a casual teacher already, it consolidated some key practices and filled some gaps that other units had missed.

> ... the unit is the most valuable unit I've done in my degree ... You have managed to set me up so well for my transition into teaching ... the lectures and guest presentations were just fantastic. 90 per cent of the questions I had, have now been answered.

> [this unit] provided opportunities to have guest speakers and lecturers who gave first hand experiences of teaching issues related to rural/remote as well as casual teaching. I am very grateful that I got to complete a unit that focused on casual teaching and rural/remote teaching as this is likely to be what my teaching career will consist of.

> ... was the best and most informative [unit] of my degree. It included so much vital information that is so important before we begin teaching... and we were exposed to so many different people who gave real life examples of teaching.

MODULE 3: COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Effective school communities are produced by building constructive relationships between the teaching principals/teachers, staff, students and parents (Wildy & Clark, 2005). Although developing these positive relationships between principals/teachers and their school communities is also of importance in urban areas, communicating with parents in order to build these beneficial relationships takes on different levels of significance in rural areas. In reality, schools in rural and urban settings can be markedly different (Hudson & Hudson, 2008).

Austin (2010, p. 16) describes the importance in terms of positive social and emotional health of making some effort to develop appropriate and meaningful connections with the community. Our research as part of the Bush Tracks project (Bush Tracks Research Collective, 2006) has, however, revealed that the process is not straightforward or easy. One experienced Teaching Principal (TP) we interviewed described the difficulties in terms of interaction with the community in her new context:

> ... it's small communities ... and how they relate ... they definitely make you feel as though you are not one of us. ... You know, I'm here to do a job at the school. I do the

best thing by the kids and [have to] keep all of that personal kind of stuff separate and I think that's where it's really hard. [TP6]

Interviews with TPs for the Bush Tracks Project (Cornish & Jenkins, 2015), as well as the presentations by rural principals and teachers to pre-service teachers enrolled in The Graduate Teacher, have illustrated how vital it is to undertake lots of homework about the background of the school, students, staff and community before taking up teaching and/or leading in a small rural school. These TPs/teachers have asserted that if they didn't take the time to do this homework then they would be guilty of making initial decisions about the school and/or students in an uninformed manner, which would then impact on them negatively. Clarke and Stevens (2004) concur that comprehensive knowledge about a rural area and its community is imperative prior to being appointed to a rural school.

Interestingly, one TP in our research illustrated the difference between his city and small rural school experiences, highlighting that 'flexibility' was a requirement of building these productive relationships with parents in a small rural community:

> *When I worked in the city, I often did not see my students' parents for six months at a time. I consider that teaching principals in small schools have to be more flexible and more aware of relationships with all members of the community or the ramifications for the TP and the school can be huge. ... In small schools a TP doesn't have time to prepare for a meeting with a parent. The parent can often just turn up. However, in larger metropolitan schools there are often steps that must be taken before a parent can make an interview time with a specific teacher. This way the teacher and/or principal in the larger school can have more time to prepare for the parent.* [TP7]

Parents in rural communities expect more 'personalised and immediate attention' as well as accessibility at most times of the day (and sometimes night) (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015), more than they do in larger urban schools. Lester (2011, p. 89) describes the differences between relationships in urban and rural contexts as follows: *the urban setting tends to be dominated by professional and school-based relationships, while the rural setting is dominated by personal and community wide relationships.* Set procedures are put in place and enforced in larger urban schools via the school's office administration so 'popping in' without prior arrangement and expecting an audience is unlikely to be successful whereas in a rural school, an unannounced visit and 'on the spot' meeting is common.

This increased desire for accessibility merges with the well documented issue of being under heightened scrutiny, often described as the 'goldfish bowl' scenario (Halsey, 2011; McConaghy, Lloyd, Hardy, & Jenkins, 2006; Miller, Graham, & Paterson, 2006). In response to this scenario, Halsey (2011) recommends the need for teaching principals (and presumably also teachers) *to negotiate and create boundaries and limit availability and workload* (p. 9).

The TP quoted above went on to talk about how he helped foster positive relationships with his parents by continually informing them about what was happening in school, either by phone or face-to-face. He admitted to being well aware that his students' parents could *create enough strife for me to be gone within a week if they wanted* [TP7].

Literature about rural teaching often describes 'deficits' (Collins, 1999; Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell, & Pegg, 2006); however according to Halsey (2011), it is easier to enhance trust in smaller schools than in larger settings. Concurring with this view, a TP we interviewed talked very highly about the support she gained from her parent community, which facilitated all sorts of fundraising activities as well as support for music, reading, after-school care, and travel to sporting events: *This parent support helps me and my staff provide for the 'whole child' as well as all students, not just the talented writer or speaker* [TP8]. However the closeness that can develop between parents and the TP/teachers because of this high level of support can serve as a 'double-edged sword' and must be tempered with impartiality:

Although I have gained a high degree of willing assistance from the community, I also aim to live by my belief that the TP has to be 'part of the community, yet apart from it'. This requires that I behave in a way that illustrates that I do not 'play favourites' concerning any particular student/family/staff member … if I have parents to dinner one night, then I ultimately must have them all, over time, i.e., all parents, teacher aides, bus drivers and grounds people. [TP8]

Thus TPs and teachers must all show a genuine appreciation for the parental support they have gained, but simultaneously they must display fairness in how they develop and nurture these relationships with different members of the school's community (Jenkins & Reitano, 2015).

It is also telling to note that Boylan et al. (1993) in a study of long-term rural teachers and why they chose to 'stay rural', identified that 90 per cent of them declared a high level of job satisfaction. Some of the reasons for this satisfaction evolved from the positive relationships they were able to engender in their small rural communities. These relationships included positive student relationships, which proved to be the greatest source of satisfaction, closely followed by high levels of satisfaction related to the supportive nature of the school and community (of which parents are a large part), as well as more opportunities for these teachers to get involved in the school and community. Two thirds of these teachers also perceived that their school community appreciated their commitment to the school. Sharplin's (2002) study of pre-service teachers highlighted their views that working in small rural schools would enable closer relationships to be fostered between teachers, their students and the communities.

Just as teachers with current rural experience are invited to address the students, so too are a panel of parents of primary school students, welcomed into the lecture program to share what they consider to be excellent contact and communication strategies. Following this segment, the pre-service teachers ask questions of the parents that are relevant to this module. The parent panels have included those who speak a language other than English at home, those whose children have special needs, and those whose children attend public as well as private and systemic schools.

In addition to this 'real' contact with parents, our pre-service teachers also read a number of articles about the challenges and benefits of rural teaching, including how to gain the support of the parent and school community. For an assignment, the pre-service teachers then interview a rural teacher about these challenging issues and their reactions to them, before constructing an 'action plan' to describe what they would do before embarking upon a rural placement, when they first arrive at the school, when and how they would meet the parents, as well as what they would set up for ongoing communication with the parents.

The following comments in the unit teaching evaluations, by both on-campus and distance education pre-service teachers, support how authentic and useful they find the learning opportunities and assessment tasks. These comments were written to describe what the students saw as the best aspects of the unit:

The practical aspects in terms of beginning teachers. Great readings and parent panels which were then recorded for us (externals). The assignments were helpful for the real world.

I believe that this unit has been the most useful unit in my degree. The unit was intellectually stimulating and provided numerous opportunities to listen to teachers, principals and parent experiences in school.

THE RURAL/URBAN DIVIDE

Teaching in rural areas can certainly be different from teaching in urban areas. All contexts can have their problems and issues are not always specific to one particular context, either rural or urban. Sometimes, however, expectations for an urban context are assumed to be equivalent for a rural context but in reality are unrealistic. Coping with stress, whether from isolation, multi-

stage teaching, lack of permanent work, difficult interpersonal relationships with parents and community, or unrealistic expectations, should be forefront in pre-service teacher preparation. While not emphasising such difficulties, we feel it is important to alert our students to the potential stress that can be caused by these issues and, in relation to unrealistic expectations, to the possibilities for creativity that can be embraced in small rural contexts: *Remoteness can lead to quirky adaptations to usual activities* (Austin, 2010, p. 16).

Our research has indicated that teachers and especially teaching principals can be very creative in these 'quirky adaptations', which are often a common-sense response to an unrealistic expectation or directive or, in Woods' (1999) description, to *meso* or *macro* stressors. Woods classified different sociological factors involved in teacher stress and burnout as operating at the micro, meso or macro level:

> *… the micro refers to social factors within each teacher's biography and person; the meso is related to institutional and other middle range factors; the macro deals with wider forces deriving from global trends and government policy.* (Woods, 1999, p. 115)

Relations with the community discussed above are examples of micro stressors while unrealistic policy directives and procedural expectations are, in the case of small rural schools, at the least meso stressors, but possibly macro stressors.

'Metrocentric' regulations that are important in urban contexts are often not at all relevant to a rural context. One example from our research relates to a TP faced with a directive that Kindergarten children should not be in a class with more than 20 students. But with only 24 or 25 students in the whole school, there was only one class and the Kindergarten children were therefore in that larger class. This TP took the decision to disobey or 'adapt' a funding requirement, in what she saw as the best interests of the Kindergarten children:

> *I remember when they said no children in a kindergarten class over twenty. But … I had twenty-five, including five kinders. So they gave me one hour per week for a kindergarten child, so that worked out at almost one day per week [5 hours]. And the money is supposed to be spent on kindergarten … [but I employed] someone to take the top end [the older students] while I worked down the bottom end, because I think that if you have not got the grounding in kindergarten, the children will struggle all the rest of their lives.* [TP3]

Woods (1999) describes teachers' processes of adaption as consisting of four stages: contestation, appropriation, strategic action and realignment. These stages can be identified in the above teacher's solution to an unrealistic requirement in her school (see Cornish, 2009b).

Directives to implement such regulations lead to feelings of conflict and frustration as teachers try to satisfy the contradictory desires of acting as directed versus working out an acceptable way of modifying the directive to be more suitable to the local context. While we are mindful of not giving our pre-service teachers the impression that they can ignore government directives, we do think it is important that they realise the limitations of a 'one size fits all' mentality and the vital importance of appropriately responding to community needs.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have described the content of parts of our B Ed (Primary) capstone unit, The Graduate Teacher. The reality for many of our graduates is a casual appointment and/or a teaching position in a rural area. The issues they are likely to confront are important ones at both personal and professional levels. While our preparation can primarily be in the form of highlighting issues rather than providing authentic experiences for them, we have designed assessment tasks related to identifying potential problems and ways of coping with them. Thus one assignment consists of designing a cross-stage one-day unit of work or series of lessons that can be used by both casual and more permanent teachers, and another involves designing a potential 'plan of action' for building links with parents and the community. It is our belief that

the content of these aspects of the capstone unit — learning about issues related to rural teaching — has far wider applicability and is of benefit to teachers whatever and wherever their future teaching position.

The preparation these students receive is, in their own opinions, useful and relevant. We are convinced that this preparation is also useful and relevant for teachers who obtain permanent employment in an urban area — the planning skills and the issues learned in order to cope with a multi-grade class in a rural area and to foster positive parent and community relationships will stand any teacher in any school in good stead.

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