

# LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE: A REMOTE RURAL PRACTICE TEACHING PROGRAM

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## Abstract

Students in the second year of their pre-service teacher education program were offered an incentive to undertake practice teaching in remote rural schools in the North-West Riverina CAP cluster. CAP provided travel and accommodation expenses. Approximately one quarter of the cohort volunteered for the practice teaching experience. After the three week practicum, students (N=23) were asked to reflect on their rural teaching and living experiences and to consider such issues as the practicum arrangement, the professional development benefits, the experience of rural living, and the value of the CAP incentives to travel and teach in the remote rural communities. All students expressed a preparedness to accept a teaching appointment in remote areas, thus supporting the efficacy of incorporating a period of teaching practice in areas which have been generally difficult to staff.

## Introduction

The staffing of rural schools in New South Wales has been a long-term problem facing administrators in the Department of School Education. The two recent reviews of the structure, organisation, administration and teacher appointment processes contained in the School Centred Education report (Scott, 1990) and the Report of the Review of New South Wales Schools (Carrick, 1989) particularly addressed staffing issues in rural 'difficult-to-staff' areas of New South Wales (Scott, 1990, p. 101). Scott (1990) recommended the introduction of local selection methods of teacher appointment and the abolition of the transfer system. Carrick (1989) recommended that pre-service teacher education courses needed to provide more adequate training of teachers for rural schools. Both reports suggested that rural teacher appointment and retention issues were important concerns that affected the quality and continuity of educational programs in rural areas.

At the pre-service level, the majority of teacher education institutions are located in the 'Newcastle - Sydney - Wollongong conurbation' (Education Commission, 1984, p.3). Approximately two-thirds (65%) of all New South Wales primary teacher education students attend an urban institution with the remaining one-third (35%) attending a rural institution. Approximately 90% of all New South Wales secondary teacher education students are enrolled in an urban institution with the remaining 10% enrolling in a rural institution. As a consequence, most graduates undertake all their practicum experiences in metropolitan schools. In New South Wales, very few urban based pre-service programs have attempted to place students in a rural practicum experience. Research by Watson, Hatton, Grundy and Squires (1986) with pre-service teacher education students revealed that only 20% of the primary students and 4% of the secondary students were prepared to teach anywhere in the state. They found that the prospective teachers had: i) very little experience of rural lifestyles; ii) a negative attitude towards a rural appointment; iii) a definite preference for coastal appointments; iv) a perception of being poorly equipped for rural teaching; and v) poor information about the provision of support for teachers in rural schools provided by their teacher education institution.

When a trial program of placing city educated students in a rural practicum experience was implemented, Watson, Hatton, Squires and Grundy (1987) reported a significant improvement in students' knowledge about rural lifestyles, preparedness to accept a rural appointment and confidence to teach in rural schools.

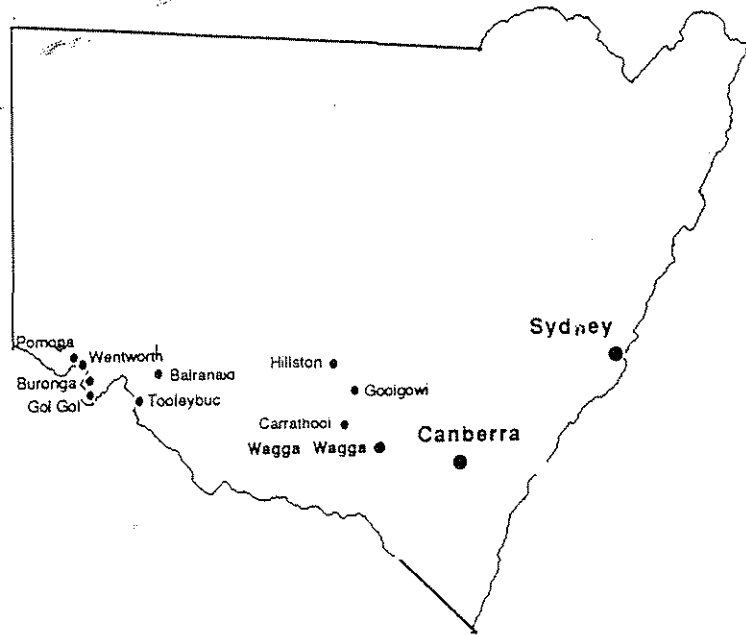
Research by Boylan, Sinclair and Squires (1990) and Smith-Davis (1989) on teacher recruitment clearly indicated that prospective teachers who grew up in rural locations and attended a rural teacher education institution were most likely to seek a rural appointment. Boylan *et al.* (1991) in a study of long-staying rural teachers (N=1100) in the three inland regions of New South Wales found that about three-quarters of these teachers (N=804, 73%) spent some part of their childhood in rural areas and for about two-thirds of the primary teachers (67%) and about one-quarter of the secondary teachers (28%) they had completed their pre-service teacher education at a rural institution. The introduction of the Rural Education Cadetships by the New South Wales Department of School Education has been one positive recruitment strategy for rural teacher appointments. Incentive packages are provided for teacher appointment and retention in remote rural schools in New South Wales. The 1991 Annual Report (Department of School Education, 1992) described the current set of incentives to teach in remote areas to include: i) a locality allowance; ii) an extra week's annual leave; iii) the retention of the transfer points system for remote schools; iv) the provision of additional professional development days; and v) a rental subsidy for teacher accommodation. Similar schemes are offered by each state and territory department of education in Australia as a way of recruiting and retaining teachers in remote areas. Typically these incentive schemes included elements such as: cash incentives; professional development leave; additional salary benefits; provision of a vehicle; extra annual leave; a transfer points system; right of return to a metropolitan area; and enhanced long service leave. Macdonald (1990) provided an excellent summary of the current incentive schemes to teachers in remote areas for each Australian state and territory.

Within the Riverina region of New South Wales, the Country Areas Program (CAP) and the primary teacher education program offered at Charles Sturt University - Riverina campus have established a remote rural practicum programme as a local initiative which is designed to provide the opportunity for second year students to live and teach in the western division of the Riverina region. This paper reports on an evaluation of this CAP initiative.

#### The Nature of the Program

The CAP Office of the North-Western Riverina region offered to meet the travel and accommodation costs incurred by Year 2 B.Ed. students placed in schools within its region. Funds to the value of \$1 500 were made available, however not all students needed reimbursement as many shared their travel and accommodation expenses.

The students spent three weeks either in a primary school or a central school during November 1991. A map of the region highlighting school localities has been presented to illustrate the distances between cities and towns. Travel times by car from Wagga Wagga to Balranald and Wagga Wagga to Dareton are  $4\frac{1}{2}$  hours and  $6\frac{1}{2}$  hours respectively.



**Figure 1**  
**Map of NW Riverina CAP Region**

### Methodology

Twenty three students involved in the CAP initiative were mailed a written survey to obtain feedback on a number of points relating to their teaching and living experiences at the completion of their practice teaching program. Twenty completed questionnaires were returned (response rate approximately 87%). The survey instrument consisted of seven open-ended questions and each question was content analysed.

### Results of the Survey

The results of this analysis are reported for each question.

#### **Question 1                      Planning and Organisation**

The students provided constructive suggestions for improvement to the planning and organisation of this practicum. Eight students were particularly displeased with how the accommodation arrangements were handled. The following quote by a student highlighted this concern: *"We needed to know more in advance what our accommodation was. It was very stressing not knowing where we were staying as we didn't know what to prepare ourselves for"*. Although eight students (40%) commented negatively on the

accommodation arrangements, six other students (30%) indicated that the overall planning and organisation was quite satisfactory.

**Question 2                      The Teaching Experience**

Nearly all the students (N=19, 95%) mentioned that they had a very positive teaching experience. Responses included the following teaching benefits: valuable insights gained into rural teaching; growth in self-confidence in the student's teaching expertise; and good supportive staff and school environment. The following two quotes illustrate the typical reactions: *"I could not have been more welcomed in any other way. I was accepted and practically felt like I had been there for years"* and *"Already I feel like a real teacher capable of handling any situation before me".*

**Question 3                      Living in Rural New South Wales**

The analysis of the students' comments to this question indicated three issues: i) the cost of living in a rural area; ii) the social life; and iii) the environmental features. A total of thirty five comments was reported and these comments have been categorised in Table 1.

**TABLE 1  
STUDENTS' COMMENTS ABOUT LIVING IN RURAL NEW SOUTH WALES**

GENERAL ISSUE	SPECIFIC POINT	NUMBER OF COMMENTS
1. Cost of Living	Expensive	6
	Same as at home	3
	Lack of access to an ATM	1
2. Social Life	A friendly community	9
	Great social life	8
	Develop appreciations and understandings about rural living	4
	Need for own transport	1
3. Environmental Feature	Beauty and peacefulness of area	3

A few remarks were negative, however the majority of the comments suggested that both residing and working in rural New South Wales had many benefits and attractions. These thoughts and feelings are evident in the next quote: *"It was a lovely experience living in rural NSW, one that has confirmed my decision that I would like to teach somewhere in that area".*

**Question 4****Improvements to this Professional Experience**

Ten students aired the view that the professional experience program was effective and should be a regular component of the pre-service course. One of these students felt. "... more should be done to encourage other students to go to places that are small and out of the way ..."

Five students expressed their concern about the way the accommodation was organised and suggested that arrangements be made much earlier. This frustration is apparent in the words of one student: "CAP could have given us a bit more notice as to where our accommodation would be. Even though it was guaranteed, it would have been good to know a bit earlier for 'piece of mind' sake."

Several other students felt that university staff should have visited the schools during the practicum to offer support and discuss problems. School of Education policy had determined that this was a telephone-liaised practicum primarily to reduce administrative and travel costs. This concern is one for staff at Charles Sturt University - Riverina to consider.

**Question 5****Value of the Professional Experience for the Students**

58 comments were made by the 20 students in response to this question. Overall, students made very positive comments about the value of their practicum in the remote rural schools. An analysis of the comments identified 4 main categories of responses as shown in Table 2.

**TABLE 2****CATEGORISATION OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES**

<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>NUMBER OF RESPONSES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES OF COMMENTS MADE</b>
Personal Reaction	23	"Everything was very much different to there in Wagga Wagga. I really enjoyed it." "The value for me was that I saw the life farming children lived." "Extremely valuable."
Professional Enrichment/ Extension about Teaching	19	"I gained valuable experience in teaching a composite class (K-3) which I thoroughly enjoyed." "It was good to see and learn about teaching in such a small community." "The experience was extremely valuable, giving me confidence to teach children in a small town as well as becoming aware of the problems Aboriginal children and their families are faced with."

Community Relationships	9	<p>"I feel I have gained a greater understanding of people and the different ways they live and behave."</p> <p>"It was really valuable as you learnt not only what a small town school was like, but also the community."</p> <p>"The value for me was that I saw how much the community gets behind school-based activities."</p>
Attitude Change to Teaching in a Remote Rural School	7	<p>"I learnt that teaching in the far West wouldn't be as bad as I previously thought."</p> <p>"I now know that I would jump at an opportunity to teach in the Western Riverina. It helped me to see that life out in this CAP area is not so much different to other places."</p>

In many ways this question was the most revealing in what the students' reactions to the practicum were. Earlier research by Watson, *et al.* (1986) identified that pre-service students lacked knowledge about rural teaching and living and thus were reluctant to apply for rural teaching positions. In this study, students reported that a positive change in their personal reaction to rural living and teaching had occurred and their professional development as a teacher was enhanced through participation in this CAP initiative.

**Question 6 Importance of Financial Assistance Offered by CAP**

Student opinion on the importance of the financial assistance for travel and accommodation provided by CAP was sought. The question asked: If you were not offered financial incentives, would you have chosen this CAP region for your professional experience? 12 students (60%) stated they would have sought a remote rural placement while the remainder (N=8, 40%) would not have selected the remote rural area. Qualificatory comments on their Yes/No response were sought. For the 'Yes' group, 7 of the 13 comments (54%) made indicated that the students wanted to gain first hand teaching experience in the remote rural CAP schools. A further 3 comments (23%) indicated that these students have family or friends living in the CAP area.

For the 'No' group, 11 of the 15 comments (73%) made revealed that, without the financial assistance, the students could not have afforded to travel to the CAP area. Thus, the CAP project provided the necessary financial support to permit these students to undertake the remote rural practicum.

**Question 7 Preparedness to Teach in CAP Area Schools**

When the responses to the final question on the survey, 'Do you want to teach in this CAP region?' are considered, the degree of success of this program is evident. All students indicated a preparedness to teach in the remote rural schools in the North Western Riverina CAP area. Written comments to support their response were sought. A total of 44 comments was made. The seven more frequently mentioned categories of comments

focussed on: i) a preference for teaching in small communities and their lifestyle (9 comments, 20%); ii) a good region to begin their teaching career (7 comments, 16%); iii) a pleasant area to live in (6 comments, 14%); iv) good supportive teachers in the schools (5 comments, 11%); v) the good support from parents/community (3 comments, 7%); vi) resources and support provided by CAP (2 comments, 5%); and vii) the personal challenges associated with teaching (2 comments, 5%).

### **Implications**

The data revealed that there were different implications for the main players involved in this study viz., students, schools, CAP and the university.

### **Student Perspective**

The CAP - funded practice teaching program was important in that it introduced many of the students to rural experiences in small towns and remote areas of New South Wales. It is believed that this resulted in positive student outcomes as the overwhelming majority of students indicated a preparedness and willingness to teach in remote, rural schools and a better understanding of the rural lifestyle.

### **School Perspective**

Staff at CAP schools supported the project in the belief that this strategy of providing access to remote rural parts of the Riverina region would be a successful way of recruiting potential teachers for these schools. From the students' responses to the survey, there has been a positive reaction to teaching in remote rural areas of the Riverina region and a strong indication of a preparedness to accept such an appointment following graduation.

### **CAP Perspective**

Given the structure of CAP with its area and regional management committees, the support provided by CAP suggested that this initiative was perceived to be a worthwhile program both for Charles Sturt University - Riverina students and for teachers in NW Riverina CAP. One aspect that needs further attention is the organisation of accommodation for the students.

### **University Perspective**

As a trial program, the links between CAP and Charles Sturt University - Riverina have been strengthened. The staff of the School of Education regards such an initiative as a means of providing a range of practice teaching experiences for its students and as an important strategy for supplying teachers prepared to accept a remote and/or rural appointment.

### **Outcomes**

From the response of Charles Sturt University - Riverina students and the participating teachers, the initiative has been continued for a second year (1992).

Further, negotiations are proceeding to widen the program to include final year B.Ed. primary students and Dip.Ed. secondary students.

For the participating students, the initiative has enabled them to engage in an professionally enriching program that has produced two important outcomes: first, a greater degree of preparedness to seek rural appointments within the NW Riverina CAP area; and second, a deeper understanding of the rural lifestyle.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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