

## THE IMPORTANCE OF A PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN A RURAL SETTING FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

Sheila King

Faculty of Education  
University of Southern Queensland

Over the past decade there has emerged a considerable amount of research and writing concerning the preparation of teachers for rural schools. Surwill (1990, p.6) concludes that pre-service teachers are often "unfamiliar with the unique problems of rural schools".

Many problems arise for beginning teachers facing employment in a rural setting because of "lack of familiarity with these areas" (Smith and Squires, 1988). It would appear that beginning teachers opt for employment in an area that is familiar to them.

Many of the new appointees to rural schools experience difficulty in adapting to the unfamiliar environment in terms of climate, socio-economics and community values and attitudes. Turney, Sinclair and Cairns (1980) in the book *Isolated Schools* discuss the 'urban-mindedness' of many teachers newly appointed to rural schools. This point is also raised by Cross, Leahy and Murphy (1989) when referring to the cultural shock experienced by new appointees. The new teacher often is not sensitised to rural living and needs the opportunity to pursue this before taking a rural appointment. "Students preparing to teach in rural schools should receive professional preparation specifically designed for this challenging career. This specially designed segment of their teacher preparation programme should include on campus and off campus experiences designed specially to meet the challenges of teaching in a rural school" (Surwill, 1990, p.7). However, Turney warns of the dangers of creating "separate courses which could create an undesirable and artificial division in the profession" (Turney, et al. 1980, p. 33). It is important that student teachers are given the opportunity to experience rural education within the parameters of the full teacher preparation course.

A number of government reports in the last ten years have also highlighted the need to sensitise teachers to the culture and conditions associated with service in remote schools. "More should be done to prepare and assist teachers for teaching in these areas of the state, and in promoting the benefits of teaching in Western Queensland" (Board of Teacher Registration, 1988, p. 87). The most useful activity recommended is practical experience in a rural setting, providing background information for pre-service teachers. Lake (1985, p. 118) states that pre-service courses should attempt to "minimise the risk of professional and social estrangement and enable teachers to more effectively contribute to the learning experiences of rural children".

In 1987, the Commonwealth Schools Commission produced a report "Schooling in Rural Australia". This report recognised the need to encourage recognition of a rural culture and rural views on schooling by pre-service teacher preparation courses. The report went on to state that teachers for rural schools should be recruited rather than imposed. This would help address the appropriate placement of teachers.

The "complicated nature of the task of teaching in isolated, country schools, has begun to be fully realised" (Turney, et al. 1980, p.31). It is important that pre-service teachers have the opportunity to identify the characteristics and problems associated with rural teaching and living. In Queensland many teachers in the early years of their career will teach in a rural

community and so it becomes obvious that teacher education needs to direct students to understand the requirements and demands of rural teaching.

Much of the research conducted on teacher attitudes to acceptance of teaching position in rural areas reflect such negative attributes as:

- no professional support for teachers;
- lack of preparation for teaching in a rural setting
- misconceived ideas on the motivation and ability of rural pupils;
- lack of experience in a rural setting;
- preference for urban situations

Many higher education institutions have started to recognise this need and have begun to incorporate some elements of preparation for rural teaching in pre-service teacher preparation. Clarke (1990, p.15) states "teacher graduates require at minimum it seems, an awareness of community, local expectations and the creative adaptation of resources".

From previous experience with teacher preference listings, many graduating teachers do not consider rural placements as an option because of lack of information. The 1988 Foster Schools Support System Evaluation Report (Crowther and Cronk) highlighted the need to establish direct links between the N.W. Region and Queensland teacher education institutions. Watson et al. (1987) state "there is strong evidence ... that first hand experience of living in the country will increase willingness to accept rural appointments". Will this be enough to encourage appropriate pre-service teachers to apply for placement in rural areas? Can we attract and retain teachers in rural areas through opportunities to experience rural living and individualised teaching?

#### **PROGRAMME TO BE INVESTIGATED**

This study looks at one attempt by a teacher education programme to build in practical experience in a rural setting. In the second year of a three year pre-service course students are offered the opportunity to participate in an Isolated Experience. The project allows students to experience teaching on a one to one basis in a rural setting, with students involved in distance education or in a small school in a remote area. Each student is either placed with a family and the student is required to teach the children using the Distance Education Papers and on air lessons, or to work alongside the teacher in a one or two teacher school. The students are also encouraged to provide enrichment and extension activities for the children. On their return the students report on their experience and are given the opportunity to follow up this experience with a practicum in a rural setting as part of their third year course requirements.

This programme has been progressing for a number of years, with the number of participants continually growing. It is appropriate to examine the value of the project in terms of preparing teachers for rural settings. Does participating in a project like this affect a change in student attitude to teaching in a rural setting?

How successful are the options being incorporated into pre-service courses in the 90s? Is it sufficient to expose students to 'bush life'? Does living in a rural community, experiencing distance education, impact on students' understanding of rural schooling? By exposing pre-service teachers to rural living will we "sensitise and prepare them for the issues that they will confront in rural communities"? (Meyenn, 1989, p. 294).

#### **FOCUS QUESTIONS FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

Is it appropriate to offer practical experience in a rural setting to pre-service teachers?

Does student attitude change following participation in an Isolated Experience?

Will isolated experience participants consider an appointment in a rural area when they graduate?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Date collection: Part 1 Prior to Isolated Experience**

Using the focus questions as a guide a questionnaire was designed. This was to be completed by participants in the 1992 isolated experience prior to participation and a group of non-participants at the same level of the three year pre-service teaching course.

The questionnaire comprised of the following topics:

- biographical data;
- rural background information;
- perceptions of a rural setting;
- attitude to teaching in rural areas;
- perceptions towards rural children.

The questionnaire was administered in a tutorial setting with all participants required to reflect individual opinions.

### **Data collection: Part 2 Post Isolated Experience**

A second questionnaire was designed for completion after the students had participated in the isolated experience. The questionnaire comprised of the following topics:

- attitude to teaching in rural areas;
- perceptions towards rural children;
- attitude to a rural appointment;
- review of the outback experience.

All participants were asked to complete this questionnaire in a tutorial setting and attach the completed questionnaire to their first questionnaire.

### **The Sample**

The questionnaire was administered to a sample comprising two groups of students.

Group 1 comprised of all participants in the 1992 isolated experience. 52 students in the second year of a three year pre-service primary teacher education course enrolled to participate in the 1992 experience. For the purpose of this project this was reduced to 24 who completed the experience. These 24 students completed the second questionnaire on completion of the isolated experience. The other 28 students would not complete the experience until February 1993, and were therefore eliminated from the research project.

Group 2 comprised of 23 second year students in the three year pre-service primary teacher education course who completed the first questionnaire. None of these students was a participant in the isolated experience programme for 1992.

## Analysis

On completion of the questionnaires, each was coded and analysed using SPSS data system. A copy of the questionnaire is available from the author.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

### (1) Survey Prior to Isolated Experience

#### 1. Biographic data

Of the total sample groups 87% of the students were female and 70% were in the under twenty age group.

#### 2. Location for Schooling

75% of Group 1 had previously lived in a rural area with 12% of these being in a remote or isolated area. 69% of Group 2 had previously lived in a rural area with 4% of these being in an isolated community. More than 50% of Group 1 completed their primary schooling in a small country town and this reduced to 45% for secondary schooling. Only 35% of Group 2 completed primary school in small country towns and this diminished to 25% for secondary schooling. (See Tables 1 and 2 below).

Table 1

#### Primary Schools

Location	Group 1	Group 2
Capital city	2 (8.5%)	4 (17%)
Provincial city	6 (25%)	10 (44%)
Country town	13 (54%)	8 (35%)
Small rural community	2 (8.5%)	1 (4%)
Property	1 (4%)	0 (9%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>	<b>23 (100%)</b>

**Table 2**  
**Secondary Schools**

Location	Group 1	Group 2
Capital city	3 (12.5%)	3 (13.5%)
Provincial city	9 (37.5%)	12 (52%)
Country town	11 (46%)	6 (26%)
Small rural community	1 (4%)	1 (4%)
Property	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24 (100%)</b>	<b>23 (100%)</b>

### 3. Rural Work Experience

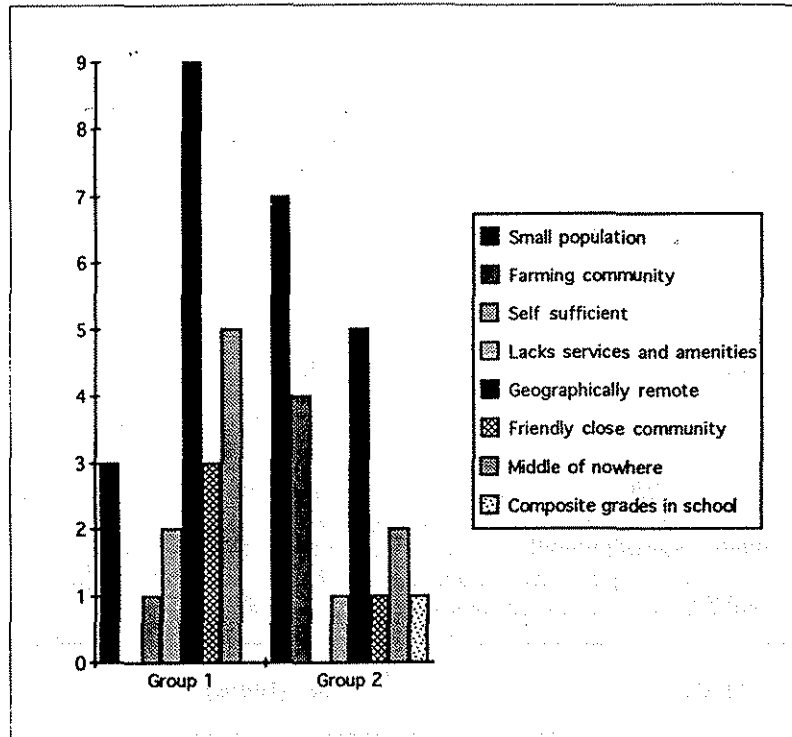
The next section of the questionnaire looked at previous work experience in rural or isolated communities. 75% of Group 1 and 91% of Group 2 had no work experience in a rural or isolated school setting. However, of the total sample 30% had some work experience in rural areas which did not involve work with children.

A third section of the questionnaire required the students to indicate their attitude to a number of statements about rural teaching.

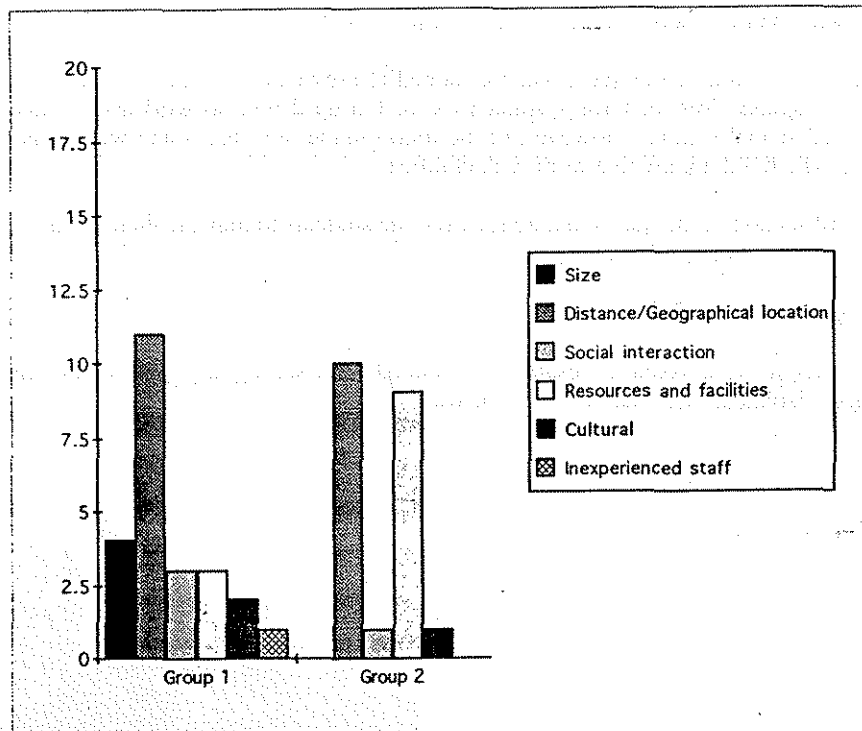
### 4. Isolation descriptors

The sample were asked to describe an isolated rural setting and list factors which make rural schools isolated. See Charts 1 and 2 below:

**Chart 1**  
**Factors Highlighting An Isolated Rural Setting**



**Chart 2**  
**Factors which make rural schools isolated**



### 5. Teaching in a Rural Setting

Prior to any experience with the Isolated Experience programme the sample were of the opinion that rural communities are very supportive of their teachers (72%) and teachers were seen as very important members of the community (66%). The sample indicated that they believed that teachers in isolated rural settings had limited social activities (57%), lacked sufficient resources (64%), and were well supported professionally by regional personnel (62%). 72% of the sample disagreed with the statement 'generally children educated in isolated areas are slower to achieve academically than urban children'.

When asked to express an opinion as to whether rural children had fewer social skills than urban children, 63.5% of Group 1 rated this claim as untrue, while 52% of Group 2 considered this statement to be true (see Table 3)

**Table 3**

#### Social Skills

	Group 1	Group 2
Very true	1 (4.5%)	2 (8.5%)
True	7 (31%)	12 (52%)
Untrue	14 (63.5%)	9 (39%)

Group 1 felt that teachers in rural settings would need to cater more for individual differences than teachers in urban settings, but Group 2 disagreed with this (see Table 4.)

**Table 4**

#### Individual Differences

	Group 1	Group 2
Very true	5 (21.5%)	3 (13%)
True	10 (43.5%)	7 (30.5%)
Untrue	8 (35%)	13 (56.5%)

## 2) Survey After Isolated Experience

### 6. Teaching in Rural Settings

Group 1 were then asked to complete a second questionnaire after they had participated in the isolated experience. The results indicated a similar response to pre-experience in the attitude to teachers in rural communities. However, there was considerable change to the statement about teachers social activities with an increase of 21% to 58% of the sample saying that the opportunity for teachers social activities were not limited. This group also noted a significant attitude change to the availability of resources. In the prior experience survey 77% believed accessing resources to be a problem however, after the isolated experience, only 29% of the sample still believed this to be the case.

Attitudes to children in the bush were further changed by the experience. After the experience 96% of Group 1 believed children in the bush achieved at the same rate as their urban counterparts, an increase of 9%. 63% of them also felt that the bush children had similar social skills, an increase of 29%. There was also a small increase in the number of students who believed that teachers do not have to cater more for individual differences. However, 46% of the group still believed this to be true (see Table 5).

Table 5

#### Teaching children in isolated, rural settings

Group 1	Pre-experience	Post-experience
Achievement rate	21 (87.5%)	23 (95.5%)
Social skills	14 (58%)	15 (62.5%)
Individual differences	15 (62.5%)	16 (66.5%)

### 7. Attitude to rural placement

67% of Group 1 agreed that a placement in a rural setting was high on their preference list while the remaining 33% said they would accept a placement in a similar area to their bush experience. (No comparison can be made with data prior to experience as this question was omitted from the original survey).

### 8. Preparation for Teaching in rural setting

92% of the students felt that teaching experience in a rural setting is an appropriate component of teacher preparation course to broaden their experiences. 54% of the students believed that they were not prepared for teaching in rural areas and needed more background preparation, individualised teaching strategies and information on resources. 95% of the students felt that the bush experience had added to their teacher preparation. The advantages they had gained were



broader skills (33%), a different teaching experience (38%) and the opportunity to consider options for a teaching placement (17%). Positive comments by Group 1 students included:

"... totally difference perspective that all pre-service teachers should experience".

"It really is a different world, experience beforehand would assist in coping with the culture shock".

"This is a valuable teaching experience which opens pre-service teacher's eyes".

"It is important to have experienced something in a rural setting to get a better understanding of rural children's needs".

## CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to investigate the perceptions of pre-service teachers to teaching in a rural setting and to examine the appropriateness of practical experience in a rural setting. It would appear that prior to rural experience the most significant factors in pre-service teachers 'thinking in identifying isolated school settings are the size of the population and the geographic location. Prior to rural experience pre-service teachers highlight accessing resources as a concern for teachers and indicate that social activities are limited for teachers in isolated areas. On completion of an isolated experience these attitudes seem to change, with a more positive approach to resourcing and social life.

The findings of the project appear to confirm the statements made earlier in this paper. Practical experience in a rural setting is one stage in the development of positive attitudes to teaching in rural schools and assists in the sensitising of teachers to the culture and conditions associated with service in remote schools. It is important to maintain these experiences within the full teacher preparation course to allow comparison and definition. Following experience in a rural setting pre-service teachers indicate a preference for a teaching position in rural schools.

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