

Teacher/Intern Partnerships in Isolated Areas: A Project Overview

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Introduction

This paper reports on a collaborative project which aims to improve the preparation of pre-service teachers for teaching in rural and remote schools. Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has joined with Education Queensland, Priority Country Area Program (PCAP), the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU) and the Board of Teacher Registration (BTR) to trial an internship for 4th year Bachelor of Education students in isolated schools in Queensland. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in remote and isolated areas.

The project will trial the use of a mentor/intern model of professional development where students and teachers work together over a six week period and share a normal teaching work load. Experienced teachers will be given the opportunity to work closely with student teachers nearing the end of the pre-service program, while the student teachers will gain from the experience of teachers familiar with special needs of schools in these communities.

The Background

The rationale behind the project is based on what has been an historically enduring and well documented concern, that is, the lack of effective preparation of teachers to teach in rural (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Helge, 1982; Barker and Beckner, 1987; Boomer, 1988). The project team were particularly concerned about Gibson's (1994) point that despite a large body of research concluding that there is a need for specialised pre-service preparation which accommodates the social and professional differences associated with work in rural and remote contexts (Turney, Sinclair & Cairns, 1980; Darnell, 1981; NBEET, 1991; Sher, 1991), the implementation of such programs by teacher education institutions has been sparse, lacking in cohesion and in many cases non-existent. In this regard, Gibson (1994:1) remarked:

Following an hiatus of more than a decade when both government and public attention was rarely focused upon the needs of rural communities in a formal and structured way, a flurry of recent state and national reports have attempted to redress this neglect. Despite this new policy level activity, however, it would appear that a recent analysis of training, staffing and selection practices across the country would indicate that little of this policy level concern has been translated into effective practice. In addition, data gathered from teachers newly appointed to rural communities raise concerns about a lack of preparedness for work in these areas.

In a recent report, Lunn (1997) reiterated many of Gibson's concerns by raising the issue of the need to 'devise and include courses that will better prepare prospective teachers for teaching and living in rural and remote areas.' The internship project has been developed in response to similar issues.

The Project

In the first year of this three year project there will be seventeen, fourth year participants from the primary and secondary strands of the Bachelor of Education. They will travel to various South Western region schools and spend six weeks working with a teacher-mentor. This first

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trial rural internship is due to take place in the last six weeks of Term 4, 1997. The second and third year of the project will focus on other areas in Queensland, including Cape York and Torres Strait Island communities, and incorporate refinements to the program as determined by experience.

This project extends the work carried out in an internship program trialed in several, Brisbane Schools between 1994 and 1996. However, the extension of internships into rural and remote schools has resulted in different areas of concern. In particular, the project aims to utilise the skills and expertise of the industry partners to investigate quality of pre-service preparation and the nature of in-service support through a joint preservice and inservice professional development strategy. Accordingly, the project will examine some of the access, equity and participation factors that may hinder the recruitment of new teachers and the retention of experienced teachers in remote areas.

An important part of the management of this project is the development of partnerships within and across institutions. The QUT research team is made up of a number of experienced researchers and practitioners. They are Dr Alan Yarrow (team leader), Professor Brian Hansford, Associate Professor Roy Ballantyne, Jan Millwater and Paul Herschell. In addition, Leslie McFarlane from the QUT, Carmen Smith from the BTR, Leonne Shaw from Education Queensland and Margaret Le Maistre from PCAP will represent their respective organisations on the project. Major funding comes from the Australian Research Council (ARC), however, each of the partners have contributed both cash and in-kind support for the project. The total funding for the three years totals \$240 000.

Another major focus of this project is in developing partnerships between teachers, student teachers and the rural community. Participants will be encouraged to actively engage in interactions designed to facilitate reflective and interactive teaching practices. The process will involve teacher-mentors and student-interns working together to develop and improve relationships with students and the wider community. The internship model used will make it essential that the student-interns develop an understanding of the needs of students and parents in their school and community. It is also hoped that geographically isolated students will benefit from improved teaching practices made relevant to the rural context.

In order to achieve our goals, the research team focuses on five underlying principles which will guide the internship. These principles were developed as a result of an initial needs analysis survey of participating teachers and students. Through the implementation of these principles it is hoped that lasting partnerships and networks will be established to ensure the continuation of the processes through the internship. These principles are:

- i) Student teachers will be given the status of associate teachers by professional bodies and thus provide opportunities for student teachers to be treated like 'real teachers' and enhance their position in the school and the community
- ii) That a reciprocal mentor/intern relationship, acknowledging different expertise, allows students and teachers to discuss and negotiate their roles
- iii) That preservice and inservice professional development occurs together as part of the same process and that this process provides support for both students teachers and practicing teachers in an internship
- iv) That combined inservice and preservice professional development that values rural life better prepares teachers entering rural areas and provides support for teachers already teaching there.

- v) That a clear explication of the rationale, structure and processes of the internship to all of the participants facilitates the smooth running of the internship and allows any problems to be quickly resolved.

The project team believes that these principles will provide a framework throughout the project and facilitate the establishment and development of partnerships between teachers, student teachers and the community.

Finally, a significant outcome of the project will be to upgrade QUT's teacher education program through the implementation of research findings, both as they inform the development of courses and the impact on university academics' awareness of the practical issues faced by isolated teachers. As a result of these changes, beginning teachers in remote area schools will be better able to teach their students and improve their learning outcomes.

It is hoped that improved student preparation in pre-service programs will make the placement of beginning teachers in schools in rural and isolated communities a less traumatic experience for teachers, students and the community. The project aims to attract a variety of students to the project and hopes to promote teaching in remote and rural schools as a preferred option for many beginning teachers.

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