

LISTENING TO COUNTRY VOICES: PREPARING ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TEACHERS FOR RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been concern about the equitable provision of education services across metropolitan and rural areas in Australia (Lunn 1997). In particular, much of the debate has revolved around the allocation and distribution of educational and community based resources and the extent to which they impact on the lives of teachers living and working in geographically isolated in areas. Recent political and social debate has highlighted a perceived disenfranchisement and marginalisation of rural and remote community which may be reflected in students learning outcomes in these areas.

In this paper we examine two aspects of this debate. Firstly, what issues do local community members highlight as needing to be addressed, in terms of preparing, attracting and retaining teachers for teaching positions in rural and remote areas. Secondly, how can pre-service education courses incorporate the perceived needs of the local community into current programs. In particular, we examine the trial of a mentor/internship program underway at Queensland University of Technology. The program aims to develop partnerships between schools, university, education departments and local communities to better prepare beginning teachers for the particular needs of the rural community.

Despite a large body of research concluding the need for specialised pre-service preparation which accommodates the social and professional differences associated with teachers' work in rural and remote contexts, the implementation of such programs by teacher education institutions has been sparse, lacking in cohesion and in many cases non-existent. This point is reiterated in Lunn's (1997) Rural Strategies Report where she raises 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."

In response to these points, this paper examines the rural community's response to the use of an internship/mentorship model of teacher pre-service and in-service professional development. For example, at a public meeting in Roma the community were invited to respond to the question "How do we better prepare, attract and retain teachers for teaching in rural and remote areas?". On the matter of providing pre-service teachers with experience in a rural and remote area context, there was consensus that this was essential if we are to prepare teachers adequately for their future teaching positions. In addition, this was seen as an effective strategy for attracting "better" or more academically successful graduating teachers to apply for teaching positions in country areas. Indeed, as one interested community member put it "...we need to promote the country as the preferred career choice for graduating teachers instead of us always ending up with those who can't get a job in the city".

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As well as the community response, we explore how well student teachers and practising teachers are able to work within the a mentorship/internship model. On the one hand, students who participated in a rural and remote area internship seemed to view the internship as a continuation of their pre-service program, bridging the gap between student and teacher status. Their response 'as finally being given the opportunity to be treated like a real teacher' viewed the internship as continuing professional development from their pre-service course into their teaching service. On the other hand, the teachers' comments about the need to explicate the program, highlighted a possible barrier to this process - that is, a perceived disjuncture between university programs and the reality of teaching in rural and remote areas. Their responses suggests to us that in the past, universities have been reluctant to explicate the rationale behind their programs and as well as the programs themselves.

We conclude that the challenge for internships and mentor programs is to identify the causes of that disjuncture and develop strategies to overcome the issues raised.

A RURAL RESPONSE

In this section we look at the responses from community members to the question, what can universities do to better prepare, attract and retain teachers for positions in rural and remote areas? The responses were given at a public forum in Roma, in central Queensland, in November 1997. Present at the meeting were members of the local community, representatives from Parents and Citizens organisations, local teachers and school administrators, undergraduate teachers undertaking an internship in a remote area school, local government officers and staff from Queensland University of Technology.

There was a clear disillusionment from the rural community with the extent to which metropolitan universities had promoted rural issues in the preparation of beginning teachers. This disillusionment can be seen under five broad headings

- The lack of development of effective teaching strategies for multi age classrooms.
- A poor understanding of cultural, social, political and religious beliefs and values dominant in rural and remote areas.
- Little acknowledgment of the role of local community in the development of relevant curriculum
- Not enough practice teaching in rural and remote schools
- Almost non-existent communication between metropolitan universities and the rural community

The lack of attention to issues affecting rural and remote communities is not new and has been well documented. Many pre-service education programs have only recently begun to address what has been an historically enduring and well documented concern, that is, the lack of effective preparation of teachers to teach in rural schools (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Helge, 1982; Barker and Beckner, 1987; Boomer, 1988; Lunn, 1997). For example. In Canada, Barker and Beckner (1987) found that despite large numbers of teachers working in rural schools there were exceptionally few universities with special training programs for prospective teacher educators. It was noted that while many institutions recognised the need for a separate program only a handful had any ongoing rural components. These findings, confirmed earlier conclusions drawn by Guenther and Weible (1983). This study reported that after contacting 25 colleges/universities which were noted for having some form of rural preparation, only one of the institutions had an ongoing program. The others had either never had one or, for various reasons, had discontinued their program.

Concern over this lack of preparedness for teaching in rural and remote area schools is clearly reflected in the community responses. The five central issues raised located many of the problems beginning teachers have with the structure and content of metropolitan based undergraduate education courses.

MULTI-AGE CLASSROOMS

A common thread in the meeting responses, particularly from the teachers present, was the concern about how well beginning teachers were prepared for teaching in multi-age classrooms. Concern focused on the nature of small schools and the unfamiliarity of many beginning teachers with the particular pedagogical and curriculum issues associated with teaching at different levels. As one experienced teacher remarked:

We almost have to start again from scratch with them [beginning teachers]. They don't have the theory or the practice or any of the strategies they'll need to survive.

And as another pointed out

By the time they're competent at teaching multi-age classes they're usually heading back to the city.

There is a perception among the rural and remote community that pre-service courses focus exclusively on single age level teaching practice and treat multi-age classrooms as an anomaly or in some way unusual. In many instances this has led to the marginalisation of rural and remote schools and communities for whom multi-age classrooms are the norm not the exception.

An increasing body of research (Byrnes, Shuster and Jones 1994, Guitierrez and Slavin, 1992, Katz, Evangelou and Hartman 1990, Miller 1990, Walsh 1989) suggests that students benefit academically, emotionally and socially in multi-age classrooms. However, the problem seems to be one of perception. The parents, community members and in many of the teachers at the meeting viewed the concentration of teacher preparation in metropolitan, single age classrooms as further isolating rural areas. The notion that students who are "forced" into multi-age classrooms in some way receive a deficit education is one that many teachers in rural and remote areas are struggling with. As another teacher argued:

We can see the educational benefits of multi-age classrooms but the message isn't getting out to the community. Universities aren't helping by just training teachers for the city.

Boylan, Squires and Smith (1994) argued that specialised pre-service courses are an important teacher recruitment strategy for rural schools. Components such as the examination of issues about rural lifestyles, community participation, provision of opportunity for multigrade and rural practice teaching, have been identified as essential components of such courses (Watson, Hatton, Grundy and Squires, 1986; Smith-Davis 1989; Cross and Murphy, 1990; Luft 1992).

Specifically, in terms of teacher preparation for multi-age classrooms Jensen and Green (1993) argue that the lack of training and support (time and resources) for teachers in multi-age settings is significantly affecting the quality of education of many students in these contexts. This finding was certainly reflected in perceptions of community members at this forum.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In addition to pedagogical concerns, many of the responses highlighted a lack of preparedness of beginning teachers for the social and cultural values, beliefs and practices of non-metropolitan areas. Concern was particularly raised over the imposition of city based programs that made unfounded assumptions about non-metropolitan communities. Generally there was a mistrust of urban based initiatives that did not fully take into account the actual nature of rural life. They argued that an unfortunate consequence of pressure from rural groups has been that the demand for equality of opportunity with urban schools has led to the imposition on rural areas of a city based and city orientated school system. As one representative from a parent organisation argued.

It's all very well to argue that kids in country schools are "disadvantaged" but most of that disadvantage comes from looking at the country in relation to the city. And to be quite honest, I don't think most bureaucrats would have a clue what it's really like past Toowoomba.

There is a clear perception that many of the barriers associated with attraction and retention of teachers in rural and remote areas are created through "myths" about the country. This point is supported in much of the literature about rural and remote area education. As Sher (1991:1) points out "rural education has the potential to be a wonderful laboratory for educational innovation and improvement" Likewise Doecke's (1987) earlier study questioning the extent to which rural and remote students are disadvantaged by their isolation concluded that many of the so called notions of disadvantage were actually constructed from an urban perspective - that is, the intrinsic belief that urban equals greater educational opportunities and therefore a better education. Doecke (1987: 31), like Darnell (1981), found that one of the fundamental errors we have all been caught in is that due to "our perception, as urban residents, (we know) what is best for rural students".

Many of the arguments put forward stemmed from a mistrust of the notion that Education Departments were actually implementing policies that would provided equal educational opportunities for all students. There was a clear link between discourses of equality and understanding the cultural differences between rural and urban life. For example, one community member drew the parallel between the increased funding for computers and on-line technology professional development in isolated areas and the impossibly high cost of STD rate calls to urban based internet service providers. He argued that without a clear understanding of the specific social and cultural issues affecting rural communities the notion of equal educational opportunities was a myth.

In terms of beginning teachers understanding the nature of life in rural and remote communities and overcoming urban based myths many community members pointed out that misconceptions about living and teaching in rural and remote areas are often slow to be resolved. This perception was supported by many experienced teachers who reported that as well as learning about the community, it took time for beginning teachers to become accepted as part of the community.

Boylan, Sinclair, Smith, Squires, Edwards, Jacob, O'Malley and Nolan (1993), in a major study into the retention of teachers in rural schools, cited the degree of community appreciation of teachers' work and the degree to which teachers' perceptions of how committed the community is to improving and supporting education, as major factors in how well teachers coped with rural and remote teaching positions. The study concluded that while on the whole teachers believe that their work was valued and the community was committed to improving education, there was a significant proportion of teachers they surveyed who disagreed with the communities'

commitment and well over a quarter felt their work was not valued. It was also found that nearly half of the teachers felt they were not treated as locals.

In recent report on education in rural communities Lunn (1997) identified six reasons beginning teachers cited as barriers to taking up positions in rural and remote areas schools. These reasons concur significantly with the responses from community members to the question of attracting teachers to rural and remote areas. They are:

- *a negative perception of teaching in rural areas as an attractive and viable career*
- *the improved employment prospects in urban schools in time of teacher shortages, especially for subject specific and specialist teachers*
- *the predominance of students from urban-suburban environments in teacher preparation courses*
- *the decline in the numbers of students from rural and remote areas entering teacher preparation courses*
- *the personal and professional consideration of experienced teachers, particularly couples, residing in metropolitan or large provincial centres that dislocation to a rural or remote areas incurs*
- *the lack of personal and professional incentives to accept a teaching position in rural and remote areas.*

An understanding of these issues was seen by many community members as beginning to ease some of the tensions associated with beginning teachers' unpreparedness for rural life. 'Fitting in' and understanding the nature of the local school community in rural and remote schools is clearly a complex issue. Our findings suggest a mistrust between rural communities and suburban/urban centred and trained teachers.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

There was consensus that community involvement in the decision making process in the day to day running of a school is much more evident in rural and remote area schools than in metropolitan schools. However, this was off set by a perception that participation in the selection of appropriate curriculum was much less available to them. Indeed, many community members felt disempowered when it came to making decisions about the inclusion of what they saw as culturally appropriate curriculum. They argued that even as the system of local districts and school based management gave the impression of devolved power, the Education department was reluctant to relinquish central control over curriculum.

This was reflected in many remarks about the role of the community in deciding curriculum. For example,

We've always had a strong support from our community when it comes to fund raising and tuck shop and that but we need to encourage more people in the community to participate in school activities which influence what it is the kids are learning.

and

I still feel that decisions are taken about the content of what is taught in schools is out of our hands

The sense of disempowerment and disenfranchisement, however, only extended to curriculum issues. In terms of local community's involvement and participation in the decisions making, it was felt that rural and remote area schools were leading the way. Indeed, it was argued that metropolitan schools could learn much from the ways rural communities integrated the school into everyday community activity. As one parent pointed out,

In some places the school is the centre of social life

While another made the observation that,

In the country you are a teacher 24 hours a day. Whenever you go shopping or even out for a walk you'll always meet a parents that wants to talk about their children.

In terms of preparing teachers for work in rural and remote areas, it was argued that an understanding of the nature and extent of community involvement in school life was essential. This is the need for both community members and teachers to develop strong links between schools and communities, particularly, if beginning teachers are going to be able to overcome some of the perceived disadvantages. If, for example, teachers are not encouraged to participate in the community as locals then these perceived disadvantages will take on more significance.

Teachers and community members alike argued that many problems associated with integration into the community arose because of what Lunn (1997) called socio-cultural dislocation - that is, teachers from urban areas have difficulty in learning or displaying the types of behaviours expected in rural settings. Lunn pointed to "different norms in socio-cultural and political characteristics, values and attitudes" as a major reason for this socio-cultural dislocation. This is confirmed by Carlson's (1992: 43-44) conclusions. He states that:

Rural communities have cultures that often prescribe the behaviour of residents, perhaps notably the behaviour of educators ... (These) perceptions are more difficult to measure, but are keenly felt:

- *verbal communications substitute for written communications*
- *validity of information is based on who said it*
- *social relations are more tightly knit and people are known as individuals*
- *small town society is more integrated with individuals performing multiple roles*
- *values of rural communities are traditional and centred on the family*
- *people in rural communities learn to 'make do' and they take pride in self sufficiency*
- *rural citizens experience direct democracy, have a sense of making a difference and experience a need for interdependence*
- *rural community organisations are less bureaucratic, more accessible and more flexible than community organisations*

Overcoming barriers to integration of beginning teachers into community life and fostering community involvement in school activities was seen as a fundamental challenge for schools, universities, Education Departments and local communities alike. It was seen that unless this was set a priority many of the perceived problems between institutions and local communities would continue.

PRACTICE TEACHING

A strategy suggested for overcoming many of these problems was the mandatory inclusion of a non-metropolitan practice as part of all pre-service teaching degrees. This was seen as an effective strategy for preparing beginning teachers teaching in rural and remote areas. The point was raised that although it was extremely likely that a teacher's first appointment would be in a non-metropolitan school there was no compulsion on the part of educational institutions to provide practice teaching in non-metropolitan schools. Indeed, many teachers pointed out that the majority of beginning teachers had not had any experience teaching in rural schools.

As one experienced teacher commented,

There can be no substitution for practical experience of the working environment. I would suggest that the rural and remote area internship program be expanded and become compulsory for all student teachers whether come to teach in the country or not

The notion of providing pre-service teachers with practical teaching experience in rural and remote areas was strongly advocated by both teachers and community members as a means for tackling many of the problems associated with social dislocation discussed in the previous section. In addition it was also strongly recommended that extended practices or internships be encouraged to provide student teachers with the opportunity to participate fully in the school community. This was supported by another comment from an experienced teacher. She said,

Student teachers can't treat their rural internship just like a normal city prac. They must learn to participate in all aspects of the school life, including mixing with the locals. They can only do this if they stay out long enough. I think the internship is a great idea.

In addition to internships there was also much support for a mentoring program between beginning teachers and experienced teachers as well as between beginning teachers and community members. This was seen as a way of cushioning the impact of the tensions created through social dislocation. As well as providing support for beginning teachers, it was argued that that mentoring should become an important component in an internship program for students nearing the end of their pre-service program.

Millwater (1996) argues that mentorship programs challenge a more traditional, authoritarian role of practicum supervisor by advocating a collaborative approach to practice teaching. This has significant implications for pre-service preparation of teachers for rural and remote positions. It was hoped that a collaborative approach to internships based in rural and remote areas would encourage participants to be actively engaged in interactions designed facilitate reflective and interactive teaching practices as well as participate effectively within the community. As Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell and Millwater (1998) point out, the process will involve teacher-mentors and student-interns working together to develop and improve relationships with students and the wider community.

A rural internship model would make it essential that the student-interns develop an understanding of the needs of students and parents in their schools and communities. It is also hoped that geographically isolated students would ultimately benefit from improved teaching practices made relevant to the rural context.

PARTNERSHIPS

A final general point raised was the need to develop effective partnerships between all interested parties. It was felt, particularly from the rural community members, that geographical isolation was exacerbated by social and cultural isolation. This had been brought about, it was argued, through the political policy which was furthering a divide between rural cultural values and those of the city.

With all the improvements in transport and communications we seem to be further away from the city than ever....and it's in the schools where we feel it the most.

It is interesting that this concern is also reflected in the literature. For example other research has concluded that despite rural education having been identified as a priority (McSwan and McShane, 1994) only recently have pre-services courses begun to include components that prepare teachers for the specific needs of teaching in rural and isolated communities. Gibson (1994:1) concluded:

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.

This disparity between policy level concern and practice indicates a need for the development of effective partnerships between educational institutions to be able to identify the particular needs of teachers preparing to work in these contexts. It was argued that these partnerships need to be able to develop strategies to deal with the variables affecting rural professionals. In terms of pre-service preparation this involves partnerships in identifying the content of specialised programs, implementing those programs in rural and remote schools and providing support across institutions and communities.

In the area of pre-service and in-service support for teachers teaching in rural and remote positions both community members and teachers suggest that there is a need to develop more effective partnerships between universities, Education Departments and community members and organisations. Generally, support for beginning teachers should be developed as a joint effort by the institutions responsible for the preparation, employment and organisation of these teachers.

A UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

In response to the issues raised in the previous section Queensland University of Technology has put into place a rural and remote area internship/mentor program. Five key areas have been identified that attempt to address the needs of schools and communities in terms of improving the preparation of teachers for rural and remote area schools. The areas are:

- *The preparation of teachers for their beginning teacher experiences* - how do we provide students with 'real' teaching experiences?
- *Preparation for teaching rural and remote area schools* - how do we better prepare teachers for their early teaching postings in rural and remote schools?
- *Support for Student teachers and teachers undertaking an internship in an isolated school* - how do we effectively explicate the expected roles in the internship and provide support for participants
- *The relationship between the student teacher and the teacher* - how do we improve these relationships?
- *The development of partnerships* - how do we effectively develop partnerships between institutions, teachers, students and the community

The program 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 program will provide the university with information specifically related to the five foci outlined above and help us towards the following major outcomes:

- 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
- That a reciprocal mentor/intern relationship, acknowledging different expertise, allows students and teachers to discuss and negotiate their roles
- That pre-service and in-service professional development occurs together as part of the same process and that this process provides support for both students teachers and practising teachers in an internship
- That combined in-service and pre-service professional development that values rural life better prepares teachers entering rural areas and provides support for teachers already teaching there.
- 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 working towards these outcomes will provide a framework to facilitate the establishment and development of partnerships between teachers, student teachers and the community. These partnerships lie at the heart of the program's overall aim to better prepare students for teaching in rural and remote areas.

For example, early trials of the program suggest that the development of support networks is making a difference for student teachers currently undertaking the internship. This is particularly evident in the extent to which professional trust is fostered within the internship. As one student teacher pointed out,

I perceive this internship to be a great 'stepping stone' between being a student teacher and a 'real' teacher. My greatest need is to be treated like a real teacher and be given the support of a 'real' teacher.

One of the major hurdles for students undertaking the internship involves coping with isolation. This reiterates and in many ways replicates the experiences of community members outlined in the first part of the paper. The internship attempts provide support for students experiencing social dislocation while at the same time giving them real experience of the life as a beginning teacher in a rural and remote school. As another student put it,

Being on prac I found it comforting to be able to be around my own supportive family and friends at night and on weekends. The internship will be completed in a town where I don't know anyone.

As part of this program we are going to have to examine innovative solutions to the problems of raised by the schools and communities themselves. Moreover, if we accept that many of our students early teaching positions will be in rural and remote area schools then early exposure to the realities of this situation, with effective support networks within the professional community, may begin to better prepare beginning teachers for their early postings in country areas.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have outlined the issues the rural community see as important and examined them in relation to other research in the area of teaching in rural and remote areas. We have also outlined how one university is attempting to address those issues through a mentor/internship program.

It is clear from the responses of the rural and remote community that there is a perception that equal access to educational opportunities throughout Australia is not occurring. It is also clear that many of the issues raised are still on the periphery of the educational agendas of metropolitan based institutions.

We conclude with the observation that until pre-service education courses treat the preparation of teachers for teaching situations outside major metropolitan areas as core business and not on the fringe of generic teaching methodology courses, then the issues raised in the first part of this paper are not likely to be addressed.

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