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The Rural Practicum: Preparing a Quality Teacher Workforce for Rural and Regional Australia

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Communities play a critical role in supporting pre-service teachers during rural and regional professional experience. This support, coupled with access to teacher educators and university resources, appears to positively influence graduate attitudes toward taking up a rural appointment. These are among the key findings to emerge from open-ended responses within 263 surveys completed for the Rethinking Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Sustainability—Renewing Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia project (TERRAnova). The national surveys, collected annually from 2008-2010, monitored the impact of state-based financial incentives designed to promote rural and regional professional experience. Findings discussed in this article have implications for teacher educators and rural school leaders as they work in partnership with communities to support pre-service teachers on rural and regional practicum.

Australia faces a shortage of teachers prepared to work in rural and regional schools. In the Australian context, terms such as regional, rural, and remote usually signify physical road distance to the nearest urban center (Australian Bureau

of Statistics [ABS], 2012). The term regional denotes areas where there is some restriction upon access to the full range of goods and services and social interaction, while rural describes areas where the restriction is moderate to high. Remote and very remote areas are those where geographic distance imposes the highest restrictions (ABS, 2012). As Australian cities are mainly coastal, the terms regional, rural, and remote are usually synonymous with inland communities. While Australia is a large continent with states and territories of varying sizes and distances—it appears no matter which state or territory you examine in Australia—the further the school from the city, the harder it is to recruit teachers.

Professional experience is a critical component for gaining confidence to work in these settings, and studies show that more positive attitudes toward rural and regional appointments flow from professional experience in these areas (Boylan, 2004; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Despite many universities' recognizing the importance of rural-based experiences, incentive schemes that encourage graduates to work in rural areas are largely unknown or underutilized, and rural professional experiences are inconsistently promoted (White et al., 2008). Students

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who do utilize these incentives have few formal avenues for sharing their experiences and limited opportunities to shape systemic change. Using qualitative survey data from pre-service teachers who undertook professional experience in rural schools, this article examines the roles played by universities and the communities in supporting pre-service teachers. The implications for teacher education and teacher recruitment are considered.

Partnerships between schools, local communities, and government “provide a strong basis for improving rural student outcomes and contribute to community strengthening” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2010, p. 9). The state of Victoria’s Rural Education Framework highlights the importance of fostering localized approaches and building partnerships across sectors and recognizes collaboration between education providers and community organizations as enabling consolidation of skills, knowledge, and resources (DEECD, 2010). In focusing on the role of teacher education, White and Reid (2008) also identified links between the sustainability of rural communities and teacher preparation, finding that rural communities stand to benefit from teacher education that is inclusive of rural education needs. White (2010) further argued that the relationships between rural schools and local communities are reciprocal, whereby successes in the areas of rural leadership and community collaboration can inform teacher education reform.

Studies have suggested that learner outcomes are positively influenced by teacher retention and stability (Page, 2006; Roberts, 2005). This finding has caused concern in non-metropolitan settings where difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers can be widespread (Cavicchiolo & Davis, 2004; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Australia’s rural schools are regularly staffed with young, inexperienced teachers and are characterized by high teacher turnover (Roberts, 2005). This trend is particularly noticeable in Indigenous communities, where appallingly low teacher retention rates have resulted in teachers being described as “two-year tourists” (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist 2004, p. 67). In the Northern Territory, the average duration of an appointment is a mere seven months (Marshall, 2010). O’Brien, Goodard, and Keffe (2008) found burnout of beginning teachers to be a common problem that “not only has a devastating influence on the personal lives of beginning teachers and their families but the associated attrition also negatively impinges on the entire teaching profession” (p. 13). Geographic isolation, weather, distance from family, and inadequate shopping facilities are among the reasons teachers give for leaving rural areas (Collins, 1999). Similarly, for pre-service teachers, fears about access to resources, isolation, and cultural differences are the main reasons associated with not wishing to teach in rural areas (Sharplin, 2010).

Issues with quality recruitment and retention are evident across Western contexts, and various strategies have been successfully implemented to entice quality teachers and reduce shortages in hard-to-staff schools, particularly those in rural and regional areas. For example, over a decade ago, the Mixed Media Programme was introduced in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Based on the redesign of pre-service teacher education delivery, the program sought to lessen the impact of teacher shortages by enabling candidates to study in their local area. School-based learning activities and electronic communication were combined with traditional face-to-face delivery (Yates, 2007). In the United States, induction processes and opportunities for collaboration and professional development have been successfully introduced to reduce turnover (American Federation of Teachers, 2007; Brill & McCartney, 2008), and in Canada, effective initial recruitment into teacher education courses has resulted in an abundant supply of teacher graduates (Tibbetts, 2008). In England and Wales, a system-wide Workload Agreement designed to reduce the amount of administrative tasks and the number of hours worked by teachers was introduced, in part as a response to shortages of specialist teachers (Barmby, 2006).

Initiatives such as these have improved success in attracting quality graduates and have resulted in effective induction and mentoring of beginning teachers. However, the narrow scope of the improvement suggests that systemic change is yet to be achieved (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). In Western countries it remains the case that around one third of new recruits resign or burnout within three to five years of beginning teaching (Ewing & Smith, 2003; O’Brien et al., 2008). For example, a study in California found that 33% of teachers leave within their first three years and 46% within five years of graduating (Brill & McCartney, 2008), and Liu (2007) reported that first-year teachers stand a higher risk of leaving the teaching profession than experienced teachers. In Canada, the “overabundance” of teacher graduates is yet to filter through to rural and northern areas, as well as to Aboriginal communities (Tibbetts, 2008). Rural schools in the United States have a below-average share of highly trained teachers (Monk, 2007), and students who attend schools in poor urban and rural communities were found to be twice as likely to be taught by an inexperienced teacher and more than twice as likely to be taught by a teacher who was a low-performer at university (Warner, 2005).

Poor teacher retention trends in Australian rural schools raise questions about the way teacher education programs currently prepare teachers for the realities of rural areas (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004). Securing quality teachers for rural and remote schools should be the responsibility of teacher education (Page, 2006) in which programs provide opportunities for students to explore what

differentiates living and working in Australia's regional and rural communities from urban settings (Boylan, 2004) and build pre-service teachers' ability to recognize and understand the differences across social, cultural, geographical, historical, political, and service domains. Further, effective skills for teaching the multi-grade class (Page, 2006), understandings of place (Grunewald, 2003), and skills to develop place-based curricula that connect students to their communities are all distinctly important for teaching in rural schools and largely absent in teacher education programs (White, 2010; White & Reid, 2008). A consequence of these failings is that teacher education courses reflect a largely metro-centric perspective and do not adequately equip their graduates to deal with the particular circumstances of rural and regional schools and their communities (Green & Reid, 2004).

Using data collected from pre-service teachers, Sinclair (2008) suggested that successful professional experiences could positively impact motivation and commitment to the teaching profession. Sharplin (2010), citing Lock (2007) and Boylan (2005), framed participation in rural professional experience and rural education units as "fundamental strategies for effective preparation of rural teachers" (p. 17). Successful rural experience ultimately relies on teacher educators, rural education leaders, and teaching staff members working collaboratively to ensure that pre-service teachers are well-prepared for working in rural schools, and that teacher education is informed by the successes of rural schools partnering with their local communities (Jarzabkowski, 2003; White & Reid, 2008; White, 2010). Hudson and Hudson (2008) also identify rural practicum as an experience that creates "attitudinal change" and instills in pre-service teachers the confidence to teach and live in rural areas (p. 74).

Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education in Australia

In 2007 a team of teacher education researchers across Australia collaborated to investigate the issue of recruitment and retention of teachers for rural sustainability. Two national projects grew from this meeting. In 2008, with funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) a three-year study, *Renewing Rural Teacher Education: Sustaining Schooling for Sustainable Future* (TERRAnova) began, and in 2009 the Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum (RRRTEC) project was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. TERRAnova has sought to discover successful strategies for preparing, attracting, and retaining high-quality teachers for rural and remote schools. The project has worked from the premise that understanding place and adopting place-consciousness are central to teacher education (Grunewald,

2003). The research combined exploration of pre-service teacher responses to university and state-based rural incentives and a study of schools that successfully retained high-quality teaching staff (White, 2010).

TERRAnova used an annual national online survey designed to monitor the impact of particular state-based financial incentives that were intended to support pre-service teachers wishing to undertake a rural or regional placement. The success of the programs was then monitored in terms of the retention of those teachers who begin teaching in a rural school. This process was coupled with a longitudinal follow-up study of teachers who had taken up positions in rural and remote schools. Building on TERRAnova, the RRRTEC project looked at what teacher education could do differently to prepare teachers for the rural workforce. RRRTEC aimed to develop a curriculum that remained inclusive of rural education needs and made visible rural and regional teacher education research, curriculum resources, and pedagogical strategies for teacher education students (White & Kline, 2012). A centralized rural and regional resource repository has been developed to assist teacher educators in the preparation of pre-service teachers for working in rural and regional schools.¹

This article focuses on qualitative data from the TERRAnova surveys. Pre-service teachers' comments about, preparing for, experiences of, and reflection after practicum in rural and regional schools are examined with a focus on the support provided by local placement communities and universities.

Methodology

Survey data were collected from pre-service teachers as part of the TERRAnova project. An online survey was made available via the TERRAnova website, and 34 public universities with teacher education programs were asked to publicize the survey to their pre-service teachers. The survey sought to gather data about pre-service teachers' experiences living and teaching in rural and remote communities and schools. Between August 2008 and December 2010, 263 surveys were completed. The survey had a total of 66 items with most requiring participants to respond using a five-point Likert scale or to select responses from categorical options.² Thirteen optional open-ended questions were also included, and additional comments were invited. This article focuses on pre-service teachers' free-text commentary about preparation for a rural practicum, experiences on practicum, and post-practicum reflections. General comments and responses to the open-ended prompts provided in Table 1 were analyzed.

¹ The RRRTEC resources are available at www.rrrtec.net.au/

² The full survey is available at www.terranoval.edu.au

Table 1

Open-Ended Survey Items Regarding Pre-Service Teachers' Rural Experience

Open-Ended Survey Items	# Responses
Preparation for rural practicum/experiences	
<i>What encouraged and inspired you to take up a country experience or practicum?</i>	175
Experiences on rural practicum	
<i>Please include any comments below about student learning experiences in rural schools.</i>	66
<i>In what way did people in the town where you undertook your experience make you feel welcome?</i>	166
<i>Were there any ways in which you felt uncomfortable, unwelcome or marginalised? Please explain.</i>	154
<i>Please describe a memorable incident about participating in the country experience or practicum placement.</i>	153
Post-practicum reflection	
<i>What do you see as the advantages of a country pre-service experience or placement?</i>	170
<i>What do you see as the disadvantages of a country pre-service experience or placement?</i>	162

The qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. Informed by Huberman and Miles's (2002) three-step content analysis procedure, responses to each open-ended question were first coded or grouped by question with the researchers reading across all responses to identify macro-level themes. This step was followed with a micro-level reading of each case to identify less pervasive themes and gaps in the data. This step was undertaken with the intent to understand and ultimately enhance pre-service teachers' experiences of rural practicum. NVivo9.2 was utilized for storage and synthesis of the data collected. These data were grouped using three tiers: preparation, practicum experiences, and post-practicum reflections. Data comprising the second and third groups were separated into the emergent themes of community and university support. Exploration of these support mechanisms has particular value for the RRRTEC research team as it makes explicit opportunities for teacher educators to strengthen pre-service teachers' preparedness for practicum in diverse rural settings. Findings from additional analyses conducted by the TERRAnova team are detailed in Reid et al. (2012).

We could not determine sample representativeness. Australian teacher education providers do not publish data on the number of pre-service teachers who complete professional experience in rural and regional settings. Further, Australian higher education statistics for initial teacher education award completions during 2008-2010 estimate that there were 16,526, 17,146 and 17,396 completions respectively (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010). These estimates are based on final year enrollment figures. As the TERRAnova survey

was open for over two years, to pre-service teachers at all levels and stages of their studies, it is assumed that the pre-service teacher population would be in excess of 50,000. As population characteristics are not available, survey representativeness cannot be ascertained.

Simple frequencies of the sample demographics are provided in Table 2. These demographics appear consistent with national trends showing that Australian students entering teacher education courses are of an increasingly mature age, with 38% of females and 8% of males enrolled in education programs during 2011 being aged 35 or above (ABS, 2011a). The gender split reflected in the responses is also consistent with the 79% female and 21% male split reported in the Australian Bureau of Statistics Education and Work, May, 2011 release. National data also show that most pre-service teachers are drawn from urban areas and attend city-based universities (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). At June 2011, more than 14.7 million people, close to two-thirds of Australia's population, resided in a capital city (ABS, 2011b).

When analyzed by gender and area in which respondents mostly lived prior to commencing pre-service teacher education, female students from a rural/regional background comprised the largest group of respondents (42%), while more males indicated a metropolitan background than a rural/regional background. Overall, exactly half of the survey participants had a metropolitan background and just over half (52%) were living in a metropolitan area at the time of completing the survey. These data suggest an over-representation of pre-service teachers with rural/regional backgrounds compared to the national average

Table 2
Pre-Service Teacher Demographics

Attribute		Percent		
		Female (N=200)	Male (N=60)	Total (N=260)
Age	<21	0	0	0
	21-25	54.2	11.5	65.8
	26-30	6.9	3.1	10.0
	>30	15.8	8.5	24.2
Area mostly lived prior to commencing teacher education program	Metropolitan	35.4	14.6	50.0
	Rural/regional	41.5	8.5	50.0
	Practicum completed in hometown	15.0	3.1	18.1
Area of residence when survey completed	Metropolitan	37.7	14.6	52.3
	Rural/regional	36.2	8.1	44.2
	Remote	3.1	0.4	3.5
Distance travelled to practicum	0-200 km	19.2	6.9	26.2
	201-500 km	28.1	6.9	35.0
	501-1,999 km	21.1	5.8	26.9
	>2,000 km	8.5	3.5	11.9
Total		76.9	23.1	

Note. Only completed surveys were included in the quantitative analysis. For the qualitative analysis all surveys with at least one qualitative response were considered.

and are noteworthy given that the intention of the state-based incentive programs in which the pre-service teachers participated is to encourage graduate teachers, especially those with metropolitan backgrounds, to work in rural schools. This over-representation should be kept in mind when considering the findings.

Findings and Discussion

The interconnection between schools and communities and the value of community-based relationships were key themes in the TERRAnova survey data.³ Universities were regarded as playing a critical role in assisting pre-service teachers to experience success in professional experience, and consistent with Boylan (2004), rural professional experience was identified as a potential pathway to future

³ Financial considerations regarding practicum also emerged, but given the extensive work already existing in this area, this is not explored in this article (see Halsey, 2005).

rural appointments. Exploration of participants' free-text references to preparing, undertaking, and reflecting on rural experiences highlights potential for collaboration with schools and communities to build a quality teacher workforce for rural and regional Australia.

Preparation for Rural Practicum/Experiences

In general, undertaking a rural practicum is optional for Australian teacher education students, and it became apparent that preparation for these experiences was not included as standard practice. Responses to "What encouraged and inspired you to take up a country experience on practicum?" could be grouped according to three key motivations:

1. Pre-service teachers who had spent time in rural settings and were keen to work with rural students accounted for approximately 30% of responses to this question.

For example:

“I was born and bred in the country and experienced what it was like to be in a disadvantaged school, and I wanted to change that for the students that I will be teaching.”

2. Pre-service teachers who had not experienced living in rural communities but who were keen to take up positions in rural schools once they graduated. For these students, practicum was an opportunity to ascertain whether teaching in a rural setting was a viable option—a test run. Approximately 35% of the sample was coded to this group.

For example:

“Pre-service experience allows you to ‘test the water’ and to see if a rural community contributes to your understanding of a rural lifestyle—and more importantly, if that is what you want to be a part of.”

3. Pre-service teachers keen to have new adventures and learn about various teaching environments. These respondents did not explicitly indicate that they planned to teach in rural schools in the future. This perspective accounted for approximately 10% of question responses.

For example:

“I’ve always wanted to have a wide variety of experiences of schools; private, coastal, lower socio economic and rural, I can say that I have had all those experiences now, and I feel that I could teach in all of those ‘types’ of schools.”

Though rural contexts are diverse, those in group one came to their practicum with knowledge of rurality and place that was distinct from colleagues new to rural settings. The clear majority had experienced life in rural settings and was able to articulate a range of reasons for wanting to work in rural communities. In 1999, Collins specifically identified interpersonal connections and satisfaction with the rural lifestyle as factors that keep teachers in rural schools. In the case of this sample, it would appear that for a large proportion of respondents, prior satisfaction with “the rural lifestyle” spurred their interest in undertaking practicum in a rural school. These respondents also tended to describe themselves as prepared for rural and regional experiences.

This trend noted, a one way ANOVA was undertaken for the five age groups and 23 additional items. The analysis revealed no significant statistical relationships between self-reported preparedness for rural/regional practicum, participant demographics, and responses to other items.

Though it was understood that the survey sample was not representative of all pre-service teachers’ experiences of rural and regional practicum, participants’ discussion of their motivation and preparedness for rural experiences was used by RRRTEC researchers to inform development of online modules and modes for the RRRTEC curriculum package which includes opportunities for developing understandings of rurality, place, and rural teachers’ work and identity. A searchable catalog of resources to assist teacher educators with the preparation of pre-service teachers for rural and regional experiences was also developed.⁴

Experiences on Rural Practicum

Survey respondents undertook professional experience in a range of remote, rural, and regional settings. Notwithstanding differences in respondent demographics, particular commonalities emerged in their reflections on professional experience. Common advantages associated with pre-service teachers undertaking practicum in non-metropolitan settings included:

1. Exposure to a breadth of professional development opportunities (n=49 responses to seven questions).
2. The opportunity to teach across a wider range of subjects and age groups, and take on additional responsibilities (n=81).
3. Acquisition of first-hand knowledge about teaching and learning in non-metropolitan settings including an opportunity to experience life as a rural teacher before committing to a regional/ rural/remote appointment (n=170).

All respondents were also asked to identify challenges or disadvantages associated with undertaking a rural/ regional practicum. The most common responses were isolation from family and friends and the costs associated with practicum. Others included a lack of privacy and access to facilities including shops and Internet. The advantages and challenges as cited are not unique to this sample. Indeed, the works of Sharplin (2002), Halsey (2005), Page (2006), and Hudson and Hudson (2008) have revealed similar patterns. What was distinctive about the free-text responses was that regardless of the questions asked, pre-

⁴ See White and Kline (2012) for further detail.

service teachers commented extensively on the role of both local communities and universities in supporting rural and regional professional experiences, with the extent to which pre-service teachers were able to realize their full potential in rural and regional settings seeming to be strongly influenced by access to community and university support.

The links pre-service teachers made with the school community and broader placement community were readily explored. Reference was made to community in each of the seven open-ended questions. “Community” generally was framed as a collection of people unified by their residential location. This term appeared in 179 responses. “Connectedness” was also commonly emphasized by the participants. Given the focus on location, it is perhaps not surprising that schools were frequently identified as central to community, if not symbolic of the community itself. This finding is consistent with the work of Arnold (2001), who found that schools were often regarded as a community resource and focal point.

Pre-service teachers referred to feeling “welcome,” “support,” and “connection,” each being closely aligned with the notion of school involvement. The prevalence of this perception is difficult to quantify as relevant responses were not elicited from a single question but rather volunteered in reply to a variety of questions such as “What encouraged and inspired you to take up a country experience or practicum?” and “In what way did people in the town where you undertook your experience make you feel welcome?” The interconnection between school and community, as well as the framing of schools as community, is illustrated in the following comments.

I think the value of community is one of the biggest advantages of doing my prac in a country town. It plays a very big role in the running of the classroom.

It was amazing to see how the school is the central focus point of the community and people will do anything to support the school.

Similarly, in other responses references to “community spirit” and “friendliness” implied that connection with the broader community was central to positive professional experience. For example:

I think the rural learning experience can be more welcoming, as teachers often socialise [*sic*] with parents and other teachers within the community.

Relationships and the intricate connections between the school and community were also common in pre-service teachers’ descriptions of memorable incidents. Pre-service

teachers tended to focus on the relationships they had built not only with students and staff, but also the connections they had forged with community members external to the school. Interaction with students, laughing, receiving a poem, sharing stories, and enjoying the “warmth” of the community around them rated highly among the pre-service teachers’ memorable moments. Pre-service teachers indicated that they had been invited to barbeques, community events, the pub, dinners, sports, concerts, sightseeing, parties, and church. However, rather than a single invitation or incident, simply being welcomed, valued, trusted, and exposed to sometimes unexpected kindness seemed to leave a very strong impression:

[Y]ou would go down to the shops and you would see teachers, students, parents and so forth and they would all say “hi” and have a chat. Being on placement in the schools gave you a strong sense of community and it was wonderful.

I went camping and fishing every weekend. I was involved in the football club for the 11 weeks I was there and they always had social functions.

Responses suggested that it was the people whom pre-service teachers met that would be most remembered—the friendly greetings and conversations they had with students and parents outside of the school context. While there were exceptions, developing a sense of connectedness to the broader community seemed intricately tied to their professional experience, with pre-service teachers generally indicating that their placement community was not only supportive, but explicitly welcoming.

Understandings about community connectedness reflected in the comments from pre-service teachers and development of skills and knowledge about community expectations of schools has implications for teacher education. Ryan et al. (2009) have discussed the importance of school and university partnerships that take into account the realities of school environments. Other researchers in this field have identified links between effective teaching and the knowledge teachers’ have of the communities where students live (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Ure, 2009) and draw pre-service teachers’ attention to the various sources of knowledge within the community (Fieman-Nemser, 2001). Common to this research base and the pre-service teacher responses is the notion that knowledge of community and place-consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003) should be reflected in classrooms and schools more generally. This knowledge can then be used to inform the curriculum (Page, 2006).

The unique advantages of the school being integral to community were readily discussed, although some significant

obligations came with these benefits. Professional conduct is particularly pertinent for teachers in rural settings who are constantly on display or in a “fish-bowl” (Miller, Graham, & Paterson, 2006). This experience can impinge on privacy and intensify the feelings of isolation that emerged simply because of the distance between the placement community and home. As one student commented, teachers are more than teachers, they are the football/netball coach and a player on the local team:

They are usually highly respected in these towns, and their opinions are often considered highly valued due to their interactions with the students and the wider community through the school.

A small number of pre-service teachers (n=6) explicitly noted that the role of teachers in rural settings is distinct from that of teachers in urban areas. According to these participants, rural teachers are respected within the broader community and are more likely to be actively involved in community life. They are also more likely to have close personal relationships with their students, parents, and community members. In light of this finding, it is perhaps not surprising that when pre-service teachers found themselves ostracized from the wider community, this incident had a detrimental impact on their professional experience. Eighty percent of pre-service teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the rural placement incentive scheme allowed them to develop knowledge and skills about acceptance by community.

A further barrier to school/community connectedness included the distances traveled by students to attend school and a disconnection between school and community systems:

[I]t was very difficult for the school to engage in the small Indigenous community I was a part of. The parents nor the community wanted to have much [sic] in the operation of the school.

I did not feel totally included and therefore had a limited understanding of the community relations outside of school. One thing I noticed was the lack of opportunity for parents to have incidental social contact when the children all came in by bus.

In the first response, the participant viewed the school as positioned separate to community, and in the second the participant painted a situation that was distinct from the highly interactive and inviting settings described elsewhere. Though noteworthy, these two experiences appeared to run against the norm.

Overall, participant comments about community and school/community intersections suggest communities have a critical role in supporting pre-service teachers during rural and regional professional experience. This finding is consistent with Miller’s (1995) investigation into the role of community schools in relation to community development and in some Australian states this finding already appears as policy. For example, the Queensland Department of Education (QDET, 2009) advocated that the school is an important part of local community life that acts as a social and cultural hub in non-metropolitan settings. Thus, it is asserted that community members can play an important role in welcoming and assisting new staff and their families (QDET, 2009). This framing is consistent with the survey responses that similarly identify local communities as filling support functions from which successful practicum experiences stem.

University supports and resources were also described as valuable, and second only to the support provided by members of the placement community. These supports could take a variety of forms, from telephone and email communications and site visits, to access to course materials and teaching resources via the university library. Placement visits were highly valued, and those who commented on missing out indicated that they were disappointed by the lack of personal contact. Unless compensated for by a very welcoming placement community and a supportive mentor teacher, isolation from the support offered by university staff and peers appeared to be one of the key barriers to a successful practicum. Pre-service teachers acknowledged and appreciated direct contact with university staff. For example:

We received plenty of non-financial support through our Teaching Fellow, who works for Country Education Project and the university. She visited most weeks to discuss our experiences and ensure we were enjoying our time.

Pre-service teachers conveyed a desire to have access to university liaison officers and information about teaching in non-metropolitan settings embedded in teaching courses. For example, two respondents commented:

I felt incredibly lonely as my prac placement was difficult and I had no support network because I was away from home. I also had no contact from my uni so I felt stranded.

Multi-age learning was an experience that I found hard, as university didn’t cover this aspect in any of their units.

Ryan et al. (2009) suggested that the visiting academic takes on heightened significance for teachers on rural practicum due to absence of a focus on rural settings in teacher education programs. However, financial constraints mean that the role of visiting academics is less likely to meet expectations. Specifically, these authors draw attention to the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia House of Representatives' (2007) Top of the Class report which highlighted problems associated with increases in the use of casual academic staff to supervise pre-service teachers in rural and regional settings (Ryan et al., 2009). Casual staff members are described as typically disconnected from teacher education courses, and thus less suited to providing "crucial communication between university lecturers and school-based supervisors" (Ryan et al., 2009, p.3).

When commenting on university support, difficulties associated with distance from pre-service colleagues were raised by participants.

Isolation from university colleagues can make it hard in times of stress.

[E]mail is okay but there is nothing like meeting up for a chat with another student and swapping stories, worries and successes!

These concerns highlight the significance of peer mentoring and suggest that in addition to visits from university liaison officers, systems that allow communication between peers would be advantageous. White, Bloomfield, and Le Cornu (2010) identified the support and mentoring roles of peers as a "relatively new 'partnerships' that warrants further exploration" (p. 189). Results from the pre-service teachers who participated in this study would tend to support this stance. Further, it may be inferred that the placement of multiple pre-service teachers in one community or school would be regarded as constructive. There is evidence that a small proportion of students were placed jointly, but as references to this arrangement were only made when commenting on accommodation, it is difficult to ascertain the influence this had on the overall practicum experience.

The complexities associated with schools-communities-universities were mapped by RRRTEC researchers in order to develop resources that would bolster pre-service teachers' understandings of working with rural and regional communities (Module 4). Topics explored include creating partnerships, social and cultural capital, and leadership. Sample activities and links to online supports are provided in this and all RRRTEC modules.

Post-Practicum Reflection

Provision of content specific to rural and regional practicum emerged as an area of pre-service teacher education that could be better addressed. This finding noted, evidence emerged that mechanisms have been put in place by some universities to support pre-service teachers on rural and regional practicum. Benefits associated with face-to-face contact with university staff were referred to repeatedly, as were the benefits of teacher education courses that incorporate content specific to rural and regional areas such as information about teaching in multi-age/multi-stage classrooms and coping with geographic isolation.

Pre-service teachers who did not have access to a university liaison identified it as an impediment and tended to discuss it in conjunction with experiences of hardship. Examination of the ways in which universities can better support pre-service teachers also revealed that connection of pre-service teachers with their peers has potential benefits in terms of emotional health, academic guidance, and professional development.

Triangulation of support from colleagues, mentor teachers, and university personnel can reduce the challenges associated with rural practica (Fry, 2006). Adding community members to this equation is likely to strengthen the support base available to pre-service teachers. According to Fry (2006), pre-service teachers on rural placements often receive inadequate support. Linking teacher education and the sustainability of rural communities can have a nourishing affect for both sectors (White & Reid, 2008). A small amount of work has described teacher education designed to teach and support aspiring rural teachers in rural and regional areas. Wenger and Dinsmore (2005), for example, described a rural cohort program designed to bring teacher education to rural and regional schools in Oregon and Idaho. In identifying institutional and community support as vital ingredients for a successful practicum, the partnering of universities, schools and communities, is an approach with significant benefits.

The ideal foundation for teacher education courses is a holistic approach to teaching and learning. Rural and regional practicum gives pre-service teachers an opportunity to experience and expand their understanding of rurality and regionality through a community-driven, theoretical, and practical lens. Providing pre-service teachers with multiple sources of knowledge to draw from provides a solid foundation from which they can develop personal teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005); learn about the students they teach and their communities while building

understandings of students, classes, and pedagogies (Ure, 2009); challenge their own assumptions (Todd & Agnello, 2006); and reflect critically on their practice (Cochran-Smith, 2005). This framework has implications for the rural and regional teacher workforce.

A positive correlation between pre-service teachers who indicated they were supported by both the university and community-school and those who would take up a rural or remote appointment was evident. In response to the question “Did participation in the incentive scheme encourage you to apply for a rural/remote teaching appointment?” 65% indicated that participation in the scheme encouraged them to apply for a rural or remote appointment. Sharplin (2002) suggested that negative concepts of teaching in rural settings are common among pre-service teachers raised in cities and attending city-based universities. While we do not know the exact proportion of students in this cohort that fit this background, it is clear that following experience in rural and regional settings, many left not only with positive perceptions of rural appointments but were also encouraged to actively pursue rural positions. For example:

I know that if I never had my experience, I wouldn't have realised [*sic*] that I have the ability teach in rural areas.

Undertaking a rural or regional practicum may also be understood as useful for the 35% who indicated that they did not intend to apply for a rural or remote appointment as the experience reduces the likelihood of both pre-service teachers and schools from having to address an ill fit once an appointment has been made. Identifying whether the fit is right is less disruptive when realized prior to taking up an appointment. As one participant commented:

It ensures that you make the right decision, for yourself and future students and employers. There is no point relocating to find out in 3 weeks that teaching in the country is not for you. It is not fair on the children and the school.

One important implication of these findings is a need for substantive, purposeful pathway planning/career education as part of teacher education—the work of matching future teachers to schools for the best possible “fits” over time. The work of Mahon and Packman (2011) in the United States suggested that teacher educators can assist students with purposeful career decision making throughout a teacher education program. They argued that an ongoing dialogue about career options can help to ensure that teacher education graduates are satisfied with the career path they

have chosen. This approach leads to the best outcomes not only for teachers, but most importantly for the students they work with.

In recognition of the need for pathway planning, the RRRTEC package has a focus on preparing for a rural career and provides a stand-alone module containing explicit advice about day-to-day work in rural/regional settings. Graduate teacher testimonials illustrate the diversity of experiences and vignettes unpacking challenging moments are included to provide realistic representations of the rural experience.

Conclusion

Establishment of a multi-tiered approach combining school, community, and university structures to support successful professional experience in rural and regional contexts is an investment in the future of the teaching profession and rural students. The 2000 Australian National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education found rural students to be substantially disadvantaged by reduced access to education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000), suggesting that recruitment of well-prepared graduates into rural and regional communities is a necessity (Sher, 1991). The results of the study reported here show clearly that there are a number of issues to be addressed.

Survey data revealed two critical factors for successful professional experience: a supportive placement community and access to teacher educators and university resources or supports. In relation to the former, pre-service teachers identified the importance of “joining” the community in which they worked. They recognized the strong links that exist between schools and communities in rural areas, with their comments alluding to schools being both central to and symbolic of such communities. They noted the role of social interactions, with both students and community members, as contributing to their community presence and acknowledged the need to develop “place consciousnesses,” particularly given the “fish bowl” effect associated with living in small towns. Overall, pre-service teachers appreciated and welcomed community support. Face-to-face access to teacher educators was also deemed to be important by pre-service teachers, who suggested that a lack of this type of support can have a detrimental impact on their rural experiences.

The RRRTEC response to these findings was the incorporation and development of tools that give voice to rural students and can be used by teacher educators to support pre-service teachers in the preparation, implementation, and reflection phases of rural and regional experiences. Materials specific to university-based learning environments as well

as strategies for, and exemplars of, community engagement are provided.⁵

Overall, support from both local communities and universities contributed to pre-service teachers' intent to apply for a rural posting. The rural practicum provided realistic experiences for pre-service teachers and helped them overcome preconceptions of rural work and life. There seems no doubt that if one crucial element was to be identified from the preceding discussion, it is the "people factor."

Based on these findings, it is understood that partnerships between teacher educators and community stakeholders have the potential to sustain pre-service teachers on rural and regional professional experience. Evidence also suggests that successful experience in rural and regional settings is linked in turn to positive attitudes toward rural and regional teaching appointments (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). While further work can be done to explore the relationship between successful professional experience and the uptake of a rural or regional teaching appointment, the data discussed in this article highlight some considerations for how teacher education can better prepare and support pre-service teachers undertaking these experiences.

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⁵ For further detail refer to the RRRTEC modules at www.rrrttec.net.au/modules.html

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