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Attracting Preservice Teachers to Remote Locations

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Abstract: Teaching in rural/remote regions poses many challenges to teachers and is identified as a priority research area by the state government. Despite initiatives by the Queensland state government and university providers to solve the issue through various incentives designed to attract teachers, the problem remains significant. This research describes and analyses the impact of a regional university initiative to attract teachers to rural and remote locations in Queensland. The data was gathered through analysis of responses from preservice teachers completing education degrees at a regional university in Queensland. The data revealed that the opportunity to experience rural and remote schools and communities resulted in positive attitudinal changes towards applying for rural and remote school placements upon graduation. The results are significant and suggest that universities have a major role to play in work force planning for graduate teachers.

Key words: preservice teachers, rural/remote teaching, challenges, attitudes

Introduction

Attracting and retaining quality teachers in rural and remote communities in Queensland has long been a major problem for employing bodies (Buetel, Adie, & Hudson, 2011; Campbell & Yates, 2011; Dorman, Kennedy, & Young, 2015; S. Hudson & Millwater, 2009; Lake, 2007; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Richards, 2012). A plethora of reasons have been identified as barriers to attracting or retaining teachers to these communities, including personal, social, technological and professional isolation (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011; Hudson, 2008). Teacher attraction and retention in rural and remote communities is identified by the Department of Education and Training (DET) in Queensland as a major problem (DET, 2014). One reason for this is the decentralised nature of rural communities throughout Queensland (Campbell & Yates, 2011; DET, 2014; P. Hudson & Hudson, 2008; S. Hudson & Millwater, 2009).

There are currently 471 state schools classified by the Department of Employment and Training (DET) as being situated in an identified rural zone. Additionally, DET has classified 165 state schools as being situated in an identified remote zone (DET, 2017a). This provides a total of 636 state schools in Queensland classified by DET as being in either an identified rural or remote zone. These figures indicate that 51.5% of Queensland's 1236 state schools are located in rural and remote zones, and currently provide schooling to around 115,000 students each year (DET, 2014). Clearly, the Department of Education and Training faces substantial logistical, organisational and bureaucratic challenges to deliver schooling to

diverse communities that are geographically dispersed over the 1.73 million square kilometres of Queensland. Importantly, the terms rural and remote must also be considered as being relative constructions. Lake (2007, p. 130) highlights this by affirming:

Remoteness has many meanings. It may be remoteness from social ties, administration, or remoteness from technical or discipline-relevant expertise and resources: Each form of isolation is context-dependent, and some remote schools are innovating to make themselves less 'isolated' than many urban schools.

In relation to the issue of social remoteness versus geographical remoteness, Dorman, Kennedy & Young (2015) observe:

A regional town of 8,000 people with significant services and within weekend driving distance of a major city is probably a different proposition for a beginning teacher compared with a remote town of 150 inhabitants that is best accessed by air.

That said, geographically rural and remote schools and students in Queensland deserve the same access to high quality education and training programs, delivered by a well-prepared and professional teaching workforce, as those students in urban centres (DET, 2014).

Accordingly, attracting high quality teachers and school leaders to teach in rural and remote locations in Queensland has been nominated as a priority by DET, to the extent that a special position has been created to coordinate the management of and response to this challenge - the Assistant Director General State Schools – Rural and Remote. Queensland Government funds have been dedicated towards researching, supporting and promoting remote teaching opportunities in Queensland. Specific research incentives include the *Horizons Grant Scheme* (DET, 2016), which supports high quality research aligned to the education and training priorities of the Queensland Government (DET, 2016). The *Remote Area Incentives Scheme* (RAIS) provides financial incentives to existing teachers working in remote regions by compensating for the costs of travel and essential items. RAIS also provides financial incentives to remain in rural and remote locations for longer than the minimum required service period (DET, 2017b). The *Beyond the Range—Professional Experience Grants* scheme encourages preservice teachers to gain professional experience in a rural or remote Queensland state school. The *Beyond the Range* scheme provides preservice teachers with financial support in addition to professional assistance at a school level (DET, 2015). Most recently, DET has initiative the *Outback Advantage* project. This project is designed to attract preservice teachers to undertake a Supervised Professional Experience (SPE) placement in rural or remote schools within the DET Darling Downs South West Region. The *Outback Advantage* project's purpose is to attract quality teachers to the region and provide ongoing support and professional development opportunities in order to encourage retention of experienced staff in Darling Downs South West Region schools.

The aforementioned State Government incentives aim to connect preservice teachers, via their initial teacher education providers, with rural and remote schools. In concert with these state-based initiatives, recommendations arising from the Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers report provide nationally recognised imperative to support closer ties between initial teacher education providers and rural and remote schools (Craven et al., 2014). Recommendation 19 of the Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers report states, “Higher education providers deliver integrated and structured professional experience throughout initial teacher education programs through formalised partnership agreements with schools” (Craven et al., 2014). As a result, there now exists a clear alignment of purpose between both state and national bodies to create and/or strengthen partnership agreements

between initial teacher education providers and schools or school clusters in rural and regional Queensland.

The introduction to this paper has identified a number of existing state government schemes or incentives to attract either experienced, graduate or preservice teachers to rural or remote schools and communities in Queensland, in addition to recognising supporting recommendations from the Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers report (Craven et al., 2014). A review of the current literature will provide a broader perspective of rural and remote recruitment and retention processes undertaken by initial teacher education providers and/or state government bodies in Australia.

Literature Review

The current literature in this field centres on the two main drivers behind rural and remote teaching in Australia – that of attraction of preservice or graduate teachers to rural and remote communities and that of retention of teaching staff in rural and remote communities (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012). Whilst Ashiedu and Scott-Ladd (2012, p. 18) observe that the “motivation to take up or leave any profession are many and complex”, their research indicates that intrinsic motivators are the key determinants behind both teacher attraction and teacher retention. The work of Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd (2012) suggests that whilst the various extrinsic incentive schemes offered by DET may have some impact on teacher attraction and retention, the intrinsic motivators, such as enjoying working with young people, intellectual fulfilment, the satisfaction of contributing to society and providing positive role models to young people also play a significant factor in attraction and retention (Young, 2017). McConaghy and Bloomfield (2004, p. 94) recognise that:

Throughout Australia it is common for many teachers to begin their professional careers in rural and remote schools. Despite this tendency, quite often we hear beginning rural teachers remark that they were inadequately prepared for the challenges of rural life and work.

McConaghy and Bloomfield (2004, p. 97) contend, “Australian rural communities are increasingly complex places”, and as such, preservice and graduate teachers are often unprepared for the environment they are entering when they undertake rural teaching (McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004, P. 97). They have reported on the factors that impact on graduate teachers in rural and remote locations. They have ascertained a range of issues that negatively impact on the recruitment and subsequent retainment of preservice teachers and graduate teachers to rural locations, including inaccurate portrayals of racial violence, lack of resourcing in comparison to urban schools, the demands of ‘living in a goldfish bowl’ and expectations of complex classroom management challenges (McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004).

In addition to factors mentioned above by McConaghy and Bloomfield (2004), other factors have been suggested as contributing to a complex rural and remote environment, including: technological issues (such as a lack of reliable internet connectivity), changing agricultural practices, socio-political alignments of rural communities, the social impact of economic rationalism on small towns (such as the reduction or complete loss of services such as banks and medical facilities), the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change, and changing notions of community and citizenship within a multicultural nation (Dorman et al., 2015; Lake, 2007; McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004). The complexity of the social environment is amplified when the teaching location is in a very remote location, which in Queensland could include Indigenous communities in far western Queensland or the

Torres Strait (Brasche & Harrington, 2012). Brasche and Harrington (2012, p. 110) point out that:

In Australia, many teachers who work in remote Indigenous communities are new or recent graduates. Furthermore, most are from white, middle-class, urban environments and have little interaction with people from other ethnicities and social class and no experience of life in isolated or remote settings.

The social and psychological impact on graduate teachers moving to live and work in rural or remote locations cannot be underplayed. Relocating from a familiar environment in an urban centre to an unknown rural or remote location is daunting, and potentially debilitating to some graduate teachers. By way of example, Milburn (2010, para. 5) reports:

We'd rather people recognise up front that they may not be up to the challenge. If you're the sort of person who needs a café latte every day and Friday night drinks and dinner with your mates then it's not for you. In some of our communities you're not allowed to drink alcohol

Graduate teachers are faced with foregoing family and friend support networks, and access to their preferred sport and cultural activities and hobbies. They potentially face the loss of ready access to services that many urban dwellers take for granted, such as access to medical, dental and allied health services. Kline & Walker-Gibbs (2015, p. 69) propose that:

Geographic isolation from family and friends, inadequate access to services and recreational facilities, inadequate preparation for multi-stage classrooms, inadequate housing, professional isolation, and extreme weather conditions account for much of the turnover of the often young and inexperienced teachers that find their way into rural schools

This view is supported by Beutel, Adie & Hudson (2011, p. 379), who noted that:

The perceptions held by preservice teachers about the challenges of teaching rurally related to a lack of teaching resources, limited access to a support network of experienced teachers and a lack of awareness of the cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status of rural students.

Kline, White & Lock (2013) noted the “fish bowl” effect of living in small rural or remote locations, and the impact that this level of scrutiny can have on teachers new to the community. Graduate teachers balance these challenges against the opportunities of new experiences and the ability to stretch their professional and personal wings.

It is recognised that much effort is required to recruit and retain staff in regional or remote regions (Beutel et al., 2011; Campbell & Yates, 2011; Dorman et al., 2015; Dow, 2004; Lock, 2008). One method of managing recruitment and retention is via incorporating rural and remote supervised professional experience placements within initial teacher education programs (Dorman et al., 2015; Lock, 2008; Reid et al., 2010). A review of the literature revealed a number of research projects that have involved preservice teachers, all reporting positive results in relation to changing preservice teacher perspectives regarding rural and remote teaching, schools and communities.

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) implemented a voluntary rural teaching program, titled *Over the Hill* (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Beutel, Adie & Hudson, 2011). The *Over the Hill* project resulted in the deployment of preservice students to rural communities in South West Queensland to participate in a short intensive supervised professional experience (SPE). The purpose of the program was to provide a short lived period of living and teaching in an isolated community to assist preservice teachers to make informed future career decisions (P. Hudson & Hudson, 2008; S. Hudson & Millwater, 2009). The *Over the Hill* project indicated, “Very significant attitudinal changes for preservice teachers’ willingness to teach in rural areas, which also dispelled misconceptions about rural living and teaching” (Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 74).

One regional University in Australia began offering a similar initiative to the *Over the Hill* project to preservice teachers in 2011. This rural experience was named the *Coast to Country* project. As with the *Over the Hill* project, the *Coast to Country* project was premised on the notion that graduate teacher recruitment to rural and remote communities in Queensland is difficult, and experience of these communities during the preservice teacher education stage will lead to preservice teachers being more ready and willing to teach in a rural or remote location following graduation (Richards, 2012). Richards (2012, p. 52) reports that the *Coast to Country* project incorporated a five-day experience to rural communities in South West Queensland that was:

Aimed at providing pre-service teachers with an experience of both living and working/teaching in rural communities and school environments through observing and teaching in rural classrooms and participating in school and community social events.

Richards (2012) reported positive outcomes from the *Coast to Country* project. Positive outcomes included increased interest and eventual placement in rural communities for SPE, and more positive perspectives towards rural teaching reported by participants in the project.

The *Beyond the Line* project, developed at the University of New England, followed a similar structure to the *Over the Hill* and *Coast to Country* projects, offering preservice teachers a voluntary three day experience in New South Wales state schools in addition to workshop activities (Gregson, Waters, & Grupetta, 2006; McConaghy & Bloomfield, 2004). The *Beyond the Line* project was specifically designed to expose, “City dwelling pre-service teaching students to the issues relating to rural education and then provide a first-hand experience of teaching in rural NSW” (Gregson, Waters & Grupetta, 2006, p. 152). Results from the *Beyond the Line* project were positive. Preservice teachers indicated they were more open to considering teaching in rural locations as a result of participation in the program. Additionally, preservice teachers identified that literature associated with rural teaching was more negative than the reality they had experience participating in the *Beyond the Line* project (Gregson et al., 2006).

The *Bush Tracks* Research Group at the University of New England comprised a cross-disciplinary collective of researchers who undertook a number of important studies that incorporated both graduate teachers and school leaders in rural and remote schools in New South Wales (Graham & Miller, 2015). Research outcomes identified a model of teacher adaptation to a rural environment that resonates with the current research project (Graham & Miller, 2015). Importantly, Cornish (2015, p. 20) identified fourteen issues that impact on rural teachers, namely: “Adaptation, isolation, transience, community, proximity, inexperience, opportunity, professional development and learning, transitions, accelerated progression to positions of leadership, relationship-building, ingenuity, integrity and identity”. These factors also resonate with the research project currently being described.

The *Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum* project considered both teaching and living in rural communities (White & Kline, 2012). Whilst this collaborative research project was primarily based in Victoria, the resulting curriculum support materials are applicable to all Australian preservice teachers who are contemplating rural or remote placement (White, Kline, Hastings, & Lock, 2011). The online resource developed from the research includes five focus areas – Experiencing rurality, Community readiness, Whole school focus, Student learning and the classroom and Preparing for a rural career (White & Kline, 2012). The aim of the online resource that resulted from the research phase of the project is, “To inspire all teacher educators to produce quality teachers for regional and rural Australia” (White et al, 2011, para. 4). Earlier work by White (2008) considered links between initial teacher education and the sustainability of rural communities

in Australia. As with the *Over the Hill*, *Coast to Country*, *Beyond the Line* and *Bush Tracks* projects, Deakin University's the *Apple* experience described by White (2008) involved preservice teachers from a primarily metropolitan background experiencing living and teaching in a rural community located in the Colac-Otway ranges in southwest Victoria. This research project reported positive outcomes, not least of which was the strong suggestion that, "There may well be a connection to be made between the nature of teacher education curriculum and the willingness of new teachers to take up positions in rural locations" (White, 2008, p. 9). Importantly, White (2008) noted in her review of the *Apple* project that:

While it was not a lengthy engagement and cannot equate with the experience of having lived there for a sustained period of time, the intensity of the interactions with the people and the place does ensure that it produces an effect in terms of understanding and consciousness.

The *Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP)* in Western Australia, initiated by Western Australian Department of Education and Training (DET), had similar organisational structure and overall goals to that of the *Over the Hill* project (Lock, 2008). However, the *Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP)* project involved several hundred preservice teachers experiencing a Supervised Professional Experience placement in a rural location in Western Australia (Lock, 2008). As with the projects described above, a majority of preservice participants in the STREP project were from a metropolitan background with little experience of rural or remote communities or schools (Lock, 2008). Overall, the STREP project had positive outcomes for the participants, rural communities and rural schools involved in the project. This is evidenced by the statement by Lock (2008, p. 29) who reports that:

While a reasonable claim can be made that the STREP has contributed to providing authentic regional teaching and living experiences, with a subsequent positive impact on recruitment to country areas, further research would be useful.

The *Tertiary Educators Rural, Regional and Remote Network (TERRR Network)* is a collaboration between academics from Curtin University, Murdoch University and the University of Western Australia (Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley, 2014). The TERRR Network focusses on, "Improving the capacity of universities to prepare teachers for employment in rural and remote locations" (Trinidad et al., 2014, p. 1). The TERRR Network considered curriculum issues, including curriculum development to prepare preservice teachers to work in rural and remote locations, in addition to implementing research in the field (Trinidad et al., 2014). In common with projects already described, the TERRR Network field work involved a five day experience in a rural community 600 km from the major metropolitan centre where students attended their initial teacher education programs. The fieldwork component of the TERRR Network model is unique in that it incorporated a cross-disciplinary component through collaboration with medical interns based in the same rural communities (Trinidad et al., 2014). The research undertaken by the TERRR Network concludes that, "There is an urgent need to include rural and remote content and contexts into teacher education courses in a structured and scaffolded manner" (Trinidad et al., 2014, p. 9). Importantly, the researchers propose that the mechanism to bring this about involves:

Developing combined placement opportunities and partnerships among schools, universities and regional networks. It also involves reflecting on placements or field trip opportunities that are not always assessed.

The rural experience projects reviewed above share a number of commonalities. Firstly, it is clear that initial teacher education providers across Australia are highly motivated to provide rural and remote SPE experiences for preservice teachers, and by extension to support rural and remote communities by way of these activities. Additionally, the reason

most commonly offered for providing these various experiences is an altruistic desire for improvement. The altruism extends to improving both preservice and graduate teachers (by way of providing a fulfilling professional pathway through employment in rural communities) and to improving rural and remote communities (by way of providing quality teachers who appreciate and actively embrace the rural community they become a part of). Secondly, the research reviewed above clearly identified positive perspectives preservice teachers developed in relation to teaching and living in rural communities as a result of undertaking a rural or remote SPE placement or experience as a part of their initial teacher education program. Research findings revealed that even a brief immersion into rural schooling communities can positively influence preservice teachers' attitudes towards seeking rural teaching placements (Buetel et al., 2011; P. Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Lock, 2008; Richards, 2012; White, 2008). Finally, an additional benefit to both rural schools and preservice teachers participating in a rural experience program is the possibility of ongoing employment resulting from the experience (Lock, 2008). As outlined by Lock (2008, p. 25), "Practicum placements in rural and remote regions also provide opportunities for schools to trial preservice teachers for future jobs in the region". To this end, Hudson and Hudson (2008, p. 68) argue that:

It is also important that the positive aspects of rural teaching placements are promoted, where many preservice teachers appreciate gaining valuable experiences with diverse people in safe, quiet and aesthetically-appealing environments.

The research literature clearly indicates the positive outcomes of rural and remote experiences for preservice teachers. These include a far greater appreciation of rural communities by participating preservice teachers, a move towards more positive perspectives held by preservice teachers regarding rural and remote supervised professional experience placements, and a greater interest in seeking a rural or remote teaching position post program completion.

Method

As detailed earlier in this paper, one regional Australian University has offered preservice teachers a voluntary experience of rural and remote schools and communities via the *Coast to Country* project since 2011. Participation in the *Coast to Country* project is available to undergraduate secondary, primary and early childhood preservice teachers, and more recently has also been offered to postgraduate preservice teachers. Approximately 30 preservice teachers are involved each year, with the experience running at the end of both Semester One and Semester Two of the academic year, with a total of approximately 200 preservice teachers undertaking the *Coast to Country* experience since the program began. The Queensland Department of Employment and Training (DET) has provided access to school communities and school principals by way of organisation of school tours, school based activities and observations and school/community social activities. Importantly, there are opportunities for preservice teachers to take whole class and small group teaching sessions at most schools. Since its inception in 2011, the aims of the *Coast to Country* project have been to provide preservice teachers with the opportunity to participate in a five-day experience in rural locations; to experience living and working in schools and rural communities; to dispel the many urban myths associated with working and teaching in rural communities; and to attract an increased number of teachers to support the future workforce needs of the state, catholic and independent school sectors in rural, remote and regional country schools (Richards, 2012).

Several factors have been identified as impacting on the *Coast to Country* project in the six years it has been offered to preservice teachers. These factors include increased employment opportunities in rural and remote communities for graduate teachers, a rapidly changing rural community demographic in areas visited during the *Coast to Country* project, (primarily through a changing rural demography due to increased coal seam gas and mining activities), and changes in long standing primary production activities in rural communities due to changing market forces and unpredictable climate and environmental factors. Additionally, the Queensland Department of Employment and Training (DET) has signalled the ongoing need for quality graduate teachers in rural and remote locations in Queensland. Qualitative research undertaken in 2011 indicated positive outcomes for preservice teachers from the initial iterations of the *Coast to Country* project (Richards, 2012). Hence, we, the authors, were interested in learning if the *Coast to Country* project continues to positively impact on preservice teacher perceptions of teaching.

Subsequent to recognising the need to review the efficacy of the *Coast to Country* project, a research project was initiated. The main aim of the research was to identify the perspectives that preservice teachers hold in regard to undertaking a *Coast to Country* experience. Following a reflective process, the key research questions were determined as being:

- How do preservice teachers perceive their rural/remote *Coast to Country* experience?
- What are the major positive aspects of such an experience?
- What are the negative aspects of these rural/remote locations?
- To what extent has the *Coast to Country* experience impacted the willingness of preservice teachers to undertake Supervised Professional Experience or to teach in rural/remote locations once graduated?

Data was gathered from students who participated in the *Coast to Country* experience between 2014 and 2016 – a total of 6 individual experiences incorporating approximately 90 preservice teachers. Participating students were required to keep a diary during the *Coast to Country* experience and provide a report at the end as a debrief activity. Additionally, participants were asked to respond in writing to several open-ended questions pertaining to participant's experiences regarding the *Coast to Country* experience.

Data Analysis

Data obtained for this study were the written statements by 14 research participants in response to a number of open-ended questions pertaining to participant's experiences regarding the rural/remote experience. Ethics approval to undertake the research was obtained. Following the submission of participant responses, the data was analysed through an open-coding process using NVivo (version 11.4.0) software. The analysis of the participant responses was in line with the process of qualitative analysis, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The work of Strauss and Corbin (1990) is foundational to the grounded theory aligned methodology that informs this study. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.19) suggested that this method of qualitative analysis entails, "organising data into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions and then using description to elucidate those categories". As such, data was derived from the participant responses by way of a method of data reduction. As a result of the data reduction process, five key themes emerged from the data. These key themes are:

- Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience positively changed their perspectives regarding rural and remote schools and communities.

- Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience provided opportunities to expand their teaching practice and experience.
 - Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience was positive in both social and professional contexts.
 - Preservice teachers reported that they were considering teaching in rural or remote locations as a result of attending the rural/remote experience.
 - Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience exposed them to high performing teachers and administrators.
- These five key themes are examined below.

Theme 1. Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience changed their perspectives regarding rural and remote schools and communities.

Preservice teachers at USC who undertook the rural/remote experience are drawn from a diverse socio-economic demographic. The current student catchment of USC is predominantly located in the coastal and hinterland corridor, stretching from Hervey Bay in the Fraser Coast region in the north, to the Redcliffe peninsular in the Moreton Region in the south. The preservice teachers who undertook the rural/remote experience had no previous experience with rural or remote communities in Queensland. As a result, their initial perspectives of rural and remote communities and schools were arguably based on a mixture of urban myth, hearsay, media and other second hand information sources.

Written responses made by participants about their perspectives of rural and remote locations in Queensland prior to undertaking the *Coast to Country* experience support the contention that the preservice participants had little knowledge of rural communities. This is evidenced in a statement by participant 5, who shared, “I had very negative perceptions about teaching rural; however, these were well and truly challenged during this experience”. Additionally, Participant 4 stated, “Prior to the trip I had some 'stereotyped' thoughts on teaching and living in the country”. Participant 8 explained “Personally, I had never been into a rural or remote community so I was very unsure what to expect and what we would see”. The statements by these participants highlight the lack of any meaningful experience with rural communities by this cohort of preservice teachers, and points to the uncertainty with which they entered into the rural/remote experience.

After undertaking the rural/remote experience, the majority of the participants clearly articulated changed perspectives of rural communities and schools. Participant 1 stated in their response:

This rural placement has not only helped me to develop as a teacher, it has changed my perception of working in rural and remote towns, from something I wasn't quite sure about, to something that I would be really excited to be a part of.

Participant 1's statement is indicative of statements made by the majority of the participants regarding their changed perspectives. Participant 2 clearly experienced a profound change in perspectives, as they responded “The experience as a whole was (to risk cliché) – life changing”. There seems little doubt that preservice teachers returned from the rural/remote experience as changed individuals. The rural/remote experience provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to compare their previous Supervised Professional Experience (SPE) placements in provincial schools to what they experienced, albeit briefly, in a rural context. Participant 11 shared, “From the first few minutes of visiting a rural school I soon comprehended how misled I was. The vast differences between city and rural schools were clearly evident throughout the trip”. This statement is supported by Participant 9 who stated, “Over this week long trip, I have been able to dispel the many myths associated with

rural or remote areas/communities and living, learning and working in these”. The statements made by these two participants are indicative of the changes in perspectives that participants experienced as a result of the rural/remote experience. The participants unanimously reported that their initial perspectives regarding rural schools and communities were inaccurate, and were rapidly redefined both during and following the rural/remote experience. In summary, analysis of this theme indicates that most of the preservice teachers who undertake the rural/remote experience a positive change in their perspectives regarding rural and remote schools and communities

Theme 2. Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience provided opportunities to expand their teaching practice and experience.

Although the rural/remote experience is only one week long, and acts as a precursor to a more formal, extended SPE placement, participants reported that the experience provided opportunities to expand their teaching practice and experience. Participant 4 stated, “I feel much more engaged and more importantly, I feel that I am much more passionate about teaching upon going on this trip”. Similarly, Participant 3 commented, “It is from this experience (rural/remote) that I have managed to hone my skills as a classroom teacher”. There is little doubt that the rural/remote experience affords participants opportunities to engage with schools and communities that have substantially different social demographics than they have previously experienced in SPE placements in provincial centres. By way of example, Participant 12 stated:

Many of the visited schools included a substantial Indigenous population. The principals of these schools educated us all on how this impacted pedagogical approaches and typical differentiation strategies were evident when being invited into classrooms. Our group was also provided with the opportunity to attend a State School with a large indigenous enrolment, which was an incredible eye opener and an experience I will remember for many years to come. As a result, I gained knowledge of Indigenous culture within a schooling and community environment, which enhanced my cultural competencies.

A comment by Participant 6 summarises the responses by the participant cohort in regards to this theme. Participant 6 states:

As an unexpected benefit, the pedagogical knowledge gained from the numerous schools we visited will benefit my teaching now and into the future. It was very evident that the rural schools are keen to acquire quality teachers.

In summary, analysis of this theme indicates that preservice teachers identified experienced and valued the various opportunities to expand their teaching practice and experience that the rural/remote experience afforded them.

Theme 3. Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience was a positive in both social and professional contexts.

The rural/remote experience provides preservice teachers with a snapshot of both rural schools and rural communities. As such, preservice teacher participants reported on the social aspects of their experience. Participant 4 mentioned, “We visited schools that ranged in size from 20 students to over 500 students with varying socio-economic circumstances, Indigenous populations and resources”. The variety of school sizes and community locations provides preservice teachers with a cross section of rural experiences. Participant 2 stated, “The students, the staff, my host family, the environment... the entire experience has left a positive mark on me both professionally and personally”. Participant 4 shared a common

acknowledgement made by the majority of participants regarding the rural/remote experience. Participant 4 stated, “I learnt that I will have plenty of opportunities professionally and personally by working closely in these schools with an extremely strong sense of community.” The strong civic spirit evident in rural communities was a welcome surprise for preservice teacher participants. They felt welcomed and accepted into the different schools and rural communities, and this made a very strong positive impression on the preservice teacher participants. Participant 5 encapsulated this feeling when they proffered that an important aspect of the rural/remote experience was, “Meeting the rural students and their parents and experiencing their friendliness, openness and knowledge of country living”. In summary, analysis of this theme unambiguously indicates that preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience was a positive in both social and professional contexts.

Theme 4. Preservice teachers reported that they are open to looking to teach in rural or remote locations as a result of attending the rural/remote experience.

Statements regarding the possibility of teaching in a rural location post-graduation were very positive across the entire preservice teacher cohort who participated in this project. Participant 4 suggested that:

*I look forward to trying to and hopefully eventually work somewhere in those areas. For the first time in my studies since I first started, I have not been more excited to finish my degree. I lost whatever fears I had about completion, whether it be if I'd even teach or if I'd be bad about it. I feel much more engaged and more importantly, I feel that I am much more **passionate** about teaching upon going on this trip.*

On a similarly positive note, Participant 2 stated, “Since spending time in the Darling Downs, I can potentially see myself teaching in a rural or remote community when I graduate”. Likewise Participant 4, who states:

The areas we visited were schools within the Barambah Cluster and schools within the South Burnett, and personally I am more than willing to spend the early years of my career in those areas as I feel it will be beneficial for me.

Participants nominated two main drivers for considering looking for employment in rural and remote school locations and communities, following graduation from their programs of study. These were lifestyle choice (for a family or single person), and career possibilities (including the ability to obtain permanent employee status in an initial teaching position and future promotion/leadership opportunities that are offered by rural school networks). These positions are evidenced by participant statements. Participant 6 makes their position clear regarding lifestyle choice with the statement, “*Coast to Country* allowed me to feel comfortable about settling my family into a country location and the possibilities that it may bring”. Additionally, Participant 7 succinctly states, “Before I went on the trip I had a bit of a check list of what I wanted from a potential employer and at every opportunity the schools we attended ticked every box and more”. In summary, analysis of this theme clearly indicates that preservice teachers reported that they are looking to teach in rural or remote locations as a result of participating in the rural/remote experience

Theme 5. Preservice teachers reported that the rural/remote experience exposed them to high performing teachers and administrators.

Arguably, a commonly held sentiment is that teachers in rural and remote locations struggle to access similar professional development opportunities and experiences to their urban colleagues. This was a perspective that participants were quickly disabused of during the

Coast to Country experience. Participant 1 stated, “I was lucky to have had the chance worked alongside some fantastic teachers who were welcoming, supportive, and genuinely happy have me as part of the staff room”. School principals made a particularly strong impression in the participants. Participant 9 reflected that, “We are very fortunate to be able to have talked to the principals, head of curriculum, teachers and first year graduate teachers”. Similarly, Participant 10 offers praise for principals when stating, “I was consistently impressed by the level of direct involvement and influence the principals had on the schools”. In summary, analysis of this theme clearly reflects preservice teacher beliefs that the rural/remote experience exposed them to high performing teachers and administrators. The data examined and analysed for each of the five key themes supports the contentions of each of the specific themes.

Discussion and Conclusions

Attracting and retaining quality teachers in rural and remote communities in Queensland continues to be problematic for employing bodies and schools. The *Coast to Country* initiative at the University of the Sunshine Coast indicates that given the opportunity for a rural experience at the preservice teacher level, even for a short period of time, preservice teachers are more inclined to consider future professional experience placements and/or employment in rural and remote locations post-graduation. This finding supports the earlier *Coast to Country* research reported by Richards (2012), and reflects research findings reported by Hudson & Hudson (2008), Gregson, Waters, & Grupetta (2006), Graham & Miller (2015), White, Kline, Hastings, & Lock (2011), White (2008), Lock (2008) and Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley (2014).

The aim of this research project was to identify the perspectives that preservice teachers hold regarding undertaking a *Coast to Country* experience in a rural/remote school, with a view to those students being more likely to consider teaching in a rural area upon graduation. Analysis of the data gathered in this research project clearly indicates that preservice teachers hold a positive perspective of the *Coast to Country* experience. Additionally, as a result of undertaking the *Coast to Country* experience, preservice teachers looked favourably upon obtaining a rural or remote teaching position following graduation. The results of the data analysis undertaken in this research project appear to support earlier research by Hudson & Hudson (2008), Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley (2014) and White (2008), which indicates that in order to teach and live in rural areas, pre-service teachers require first hand experiences to create changes to their attitudes regarding rural and remote communities and schools.

Richards (2012, p. 60) reported that an analysis of earlier *Coast to Country* outcomes indicated 39 preservice teachers being placed into SPE placements in a rural/remote location in Queensland in between 2009 and 2011 as a direct result of undertaking the *Coast to Country* experience. A direct correlation between the *Coast to Country* project, leading to Supervised Professional Experience placement in rural schools cannot be identified. In the 2016 academic year, 126 preservice teachers undertook a rural/remote Supervised Professional Experience. Some of these students had also undertaken the *Coast to Country* experience prior to entering their rural/remote SPE placement, but many had not. Conversely, some students who undertook the *Coast to Country* experience did not undertake a rural SPE placement.

Analysis of the data gathered in this research project suggests preservice teachers derive an increased level of confidence from an initial positive experience in rural schools and communities through the *Coast to Country* project. This increased level of confidence

provides the impetus for preservice teachers to seek out future experiences of rural schools. The five-day duration of the *Coast to Country* experience provides access to a selection of rural school and community types, allowing early childhood, primary and secondary preservice teachers to experience various rural centres before making longer commitments to future rural placements or employment options. Research outcomes reported by Hudson and Hudson (2008), Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, and Broadley (2014) and White (2008) indicate that for those preservice teachers who undertake an SPE placement in a rural centre, the transition process from an urban to a rural community to undertake a teaching position after graduating is far more manageable. One avenue of further research will be to investigate whether there is any evidence of this as a result of undertaking the *Coast to Country* experience.

Analysis of this research project clearly indicates the value in continuing to develop and deliver the *Coast to Country* project. Arguably, increased preservice teacher interest in the *Coast to Country* project reflects a greater interest in future placement and employment pathways in rural Queensland by preservice teachers. Exposure to high performing teachers and administrators, access to positive social and professional communities and opportunities to expand their teaching practice and experience were all identified as key themes in the data analysis process, and may conceivably be powerful determinants in the minds of graduate teachers considering a rural teaching appointment.

Whilst affirming the encouraging findings of the research reported here, we suggest further issues to explore include the impact of the length of experience on preservice teachers disposition to teach in rural and remote schools in Queensland. We believe that a short experience may not fully prepare students for the realities of teaching in such communities and that a variety of factors may impact on a teacher's desire to stay in such locations. We suggest that demographic factors including age, gender, place of birth and marital status are significant variables that only serve to paint a more complicated picture of the enablers and inhibitors attracting preservice teachers to take up teaching positions in such locations. It is evident that current financial initiatives, including RAIS, *Coast to Country* experience are helpful, but do require further consideration alongside other recruitment solutions. We also identify two broader related issues; that of attracting quality teacher leaders (i.e. principals) to rural locations, and the retention of quality teachers in rural locations. These issues have been identified as future research focuses to provide more sustainable long term solutions.

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