Preparing Teachers for Rural Appointments: Lessons from Australia

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Education authorities continue to experience difficulty in recruiting and retaining teachers in rural and remote schools. In Western Australia (WA), a state noted for its vastness and number of schools located in rural and remote settings, a scheme developed by the Western Australian Department of Education and Training (DET) and the WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy aims to address this challenge by offering financial support to student teachers who wish to undertake their final practicum in a remote or rural education district in which they hope to work after graduation. The Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP) assists with return travel costs and a weekly stipend for the duration of the practicum. The DET specifies the particular districts to which the STREP will apply and applicants need to satisfy a number of selection criteria. In 2005 a survey involving 2004 and 2005 STREP participants was undertaken to ascertain their opinions about how effective the program was in preparing them to teach in rural locations. This article discusses the quantitative data and participant comments on issues not adequately covered by STREP and how the program might be improved.

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Recruitment and Retention of Teachers in Rural Schools

Traditionally it has been difficult attracting and retaining teachers and other professionals to rural and remote areas (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004). Within the first five years of rural and regional practice, isolation in the way of geography and professional development is likely to result in many professionals leaving their professions in country placements (Herrington & Herrington, 2001). In the metropolitan areas of Australia, professionals account for 20% of the workforce, while in regional areas, professionals comprise only 11% (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004). Furthermore, according to the Australian Council of Deans of Education (1999), teacher supply and demand projections in the future suggest an expected national shortfall in the order of approximately two percent. Thus, the expected shortfall coupled with the present difficulty in attracting teachers to rural and remote areas suggests major problems in staffing for many rural and remote schools.

The review of the literature revealed three broad themes: the impact of teacher shortages (Boylan, Sinclair, Smith, Squires, Edwards, Jacob, O'Malley & Nolan, 1993; Gibson, 1994; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott, 2002; Miller 1995; Westling & Whitten, 1996), reasons for teacher shortages (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan, 2004; Sharplin, 2002) and pre-service regional placements (Boylan, et al., 1993; Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Davis, 2002; Gibson, 1994; Halsey, 2005; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000; Moir & Gless, 2001; Murphy & Cross, 1990; Ramsey, 2000).

Given the focus of this research, a more detailed review of all the above literature would be irrelevant. Consequently, the review will concentrate on the aspects of the literature relevant to the focus of this article, namely, pre-service teacher practicum placements in rural/remote areas and pre-service teacher expectations about teaching in regional settings.

Pre-service Teacher Practicum Placements

According to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2000) current teaching courses do not equip students with the skills and knowledge to teach in rural and remote locations. A report by the Commonwealth Schools Commission (CSC) entitled Schooling in Rural Australia (1988) concluded that university preparation was insufficient for teachers to teach effectively in rural areas. In particular, students need to be equipped to face the special challenges and conditions for rural teaching prior to appointment. Moir and Gless (2001) found that the early experiences of new teachers serve to set the norms and standards that will guide them throughout their careers. Thus, as the first few years of teaching are the most important it is imperative that universities and schools work together to ensure new teachers have the knowledge, skills and support necessary to help them succeed in their first placements. One proposal is that this success can be achieved through tailoring teaching courses to meet the needs of regional and remote communities and by allowing pre-service teachers the opportunity to experience working in remote areas (Ramsey, 2000). Moreover, this development may educate students to the remote lifestyle and possibly aid in the attraction and retention of teachers to rural and remote areas (Commonwealth Schools Commission, CSC, 1988; Davis, 2002; Gibson, 1994; Halsey, 2005; HREOC, 2000; Murphy & Cross, 1990; Ramsey, 2000).

A study by Halsey (2005) into existing pre-service country teaching placements in Australia has found numerous advantages for the students, schools and community. A majority of previous rural and remote practicum students overwhelmingly acknowledged the importance of their rural placement as an element in their preparation for teaching. Specifically, the placement allows the student exposure to diversity of experience, that is, pre-service teachers are exposed to a wide range of opportunities such as special education, multi age classrooms, indigenous and culturally diverse communities and non-school settings. Moreover, rural placements provide a smooth transition between university and work in a remote school.

Practicum placements in rural and remote regions also provide opportunities for schools to trial pre-service teachers for future jobs in the region (Halsey, 2005). Through gaining experience in living and working in remote schools, the potential exists to increase the available pool of teachers likely to be attracted to and stay in remote regions from which schools may choose (Gibson, 1994). In addition, rural practicum placements provide advantages for the supervising teacher in the shape of professional development skills, an extra resource to handle classes and allow teachers to spend more time with individuals. Thus, the literature suggests that due to the many advantages of rural placements for teachers, schools and pre-service students the provision of pre-service regional practicum opportunities may contribute to attracting and retaining teachers to rural and remote schools in the long term.

Halsey (2005) recommended that one of the roles of universities is to co-operate and collaborate with schools and communities to improve the size and quality of pre-service placement programs on offer to students. He also suggested that universities develop policies to increase the number of placements available to pre-service students. Furthermore, the literature has commented about universities' responsibility to provide resources and funding based on actual costs for students. Placements are likely to place cost pressures on students in the form of accommodation and rent commitments in both the remote location and in their home town, travel expenses, loss of income from part time work and the need to care for their own families. Therefore, institutions ought to provide undergraduates with the opportunity to undertake fully funded practicum placements in rural and remote schools to ensure pre-service teachers gain first hand knowledge of what it is like to teach in remote schools (CSC, 1988; Halsey, 2005; HREOC, 2000; Ramsey, 2000).

Pre-service Teacher Expectations about Teaching in Regional Settings

In addition to the literature on pre-service regional placements, research, which has examined pre-service teacher expectations about teaching in regional settings, is also relevant since one of the potential impacts of participating in a regional practicum is to provide pre-service teachers with an introduction to teaching and living in regional areas.

Sharplin (2002) examined the expectations of twenty-two pre-service teachers aged between 22 and 41 to assess what barriers exist in their perceptions to accepting positions in remote regions. The questionnaire focused on preconceptions of what living and working in a remote community would involve. Participants identified both professional and personal disadvantages and advantages to accepting a position in a rural or remote area. Challenges they expected to face within their professional domain included a lack of mentorship, limited access to teachers within their expertise and lack of professional development days. Pre-service teachers' preconceptions regarding their personal and social life included uncertainty regarding the experience of socialization into the community, isolation from family and friends, and loss of anonymity in a small town.

Pre-service teachers also identified positive professional and personal preconceptions about teaching in regional schools (Sharplin, 2002). Expectations involving the teachers' professional life included opportunities for increased responsibility, knowledge of staff and students, exposure to a different curriculum and a variety of teaching methods. The positive expectations expressed about teaching in regional areas included belonging to a community, providing a great place for their own family to live, diversity of community, and a novel experience.

Sharplin (2002) concluded that negative and idealized preconceptions held by pre-service teachers have the potential to impact negatively on potential recruitment and retention of teachers to rural schools. Specifically, teachers' negative perceptions may deter them from accepting appointments in rural and remote schools, while idealized preconceptions can lead to dissatisfaction with their positions when a teacher's expectations are not congruent with their reality. Due to the discouraging effect of poorly informed expectations, it may be beneficial in retaining and attracting new teachers if they are educated to the realities of teacher positions in remote districts.

Attracting and retaining teachers to remote/rural areas has always been problematic in Australia. Unfortunately, teacher shortages have negative consequences for the community, teachers, and students living in regional hubs. The causes of teachers being reluctant to accept and stay in regional schools vary. However, the research literature cites reasons including differences between the metropolitan and rural lifestyle, national politics resulting in fewer services, and lastly, the negative or idealized preconceptions of prospective teachers. One possible solution to the attraction and retention problem is to provide rural placements for pre-service students in their final year at university. Placements allow students the opportunity to gain first hand experience in rural and remote regions and develop the necessary

attributes to be successful when accepting rural positions. Moreover, the literature suggests that in order for placements to be successful, universities need to take an active and supportive role.

The Student Teacher Rural Experience Program

The Student Teacher Rural Experience Program (STREP) commenced in 1999 with the aim of supporting the Western Australian Department of Education and Training's (DET) efforts to attract and retain teachers in rural schools. Universities, through their practicum departments, play a key role in promoting the scheme by distributing information to their pre-service teachers. Details about the program are also available on the DET website.

The DET specifies the particular districts to which the STREP will apply and applicants need to satisfy a number of selection criteria. Successful applicants receive travel costs and a weekly stipend between $100 and $140 per week, with pre-service teachers being responsible for arranging their own accommodation. Between 1999 and June 2005 five hundred and eleven pre-service teachers received scholarships to participate in the program, while from July 2005 to June 2006 there were another one hundred and seventy one applicants for the program (DET, n.d.).

In 2003 the School of Education at Edith Cowan University was approached by the DET to investigate STREP participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the program in preparing them to teach in rural and remote geographic locations. Between May and July 2005 participants in the 2004 and 2005 STREP were asked to complete a questionnaire sent to them through the postal service. This paper discusses the responses of those who completed and returned the questionnaire.

Methodology

In 2005 a survey, involving 2004 and 2005 STREP participants was undertaken to ascertain their opinions about how effective the program was in preparing them to teach in rural locations.

After obtaining approval from the ECU ethics committee, 164 surveys were mailed, with 5 being returned by individuals who either withdrew from or were identified incorrectly as having participated in the program. Of the 159 remaining surveys, 30 were returned, representing an 18.86% return rate.

The survey consisted of four parts: part A asked for socio-biographical characteristics; part B inquired whether STREP was an influence in deciding to undertake a regional practicum and apply for a position in a rural or remote location; part C asked participants to respond to 23 items regarding developing skills and knowledge about living and working in rural/remote communities, using a five point Likert-type rating scale; and part D sought qualitative information relating to the items in part C.

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 13.0, but the small sample precluded any sophisticated statistical analysis. A one–way ANOVA was performed on the five age groups and twenty three items in Part C, while t-tests were undertaken, respectively, for gender, area of residence prior to pre-service teacher education and whether the STREP practicum was undertaken in their hometown, by the twenty three items in Part C.

The qualitative data were analyzed to identify any themes that had emerged within each of the questions, with these themes providing the framework for subsequent discussion. In essence, the data were coded—a process that, according to Wiersma and Jurs, (2005), involves "… organizing data and obtaining data reduction." In other words, it is the process by which qualitative researchers "see what they have in the data" (p. 206).

Results

In addition to discussing the data obtained from sections A, B and C of the questionnaire, this section also considers participant response to two questions in section D: "List and describe briefly issues that you think that participation in the STREP does not adequately cover" and "In what ways do you think that the STREP might be improved?"

Part A of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate their gender, age, the area in which they mostly lived prior to commencing pre-service teacher education and whether they undertook the STREP in their home town. Of the thirty respondents, 6 were male and 24 female. The majority of the sample (16) was aged between 20 and 24 (53.3%), five (16.7%) between 25 and 29, three (10%) between 30 and 34, two (6.7%) from 35 to 39, and 4 (13.3%) were aged over 40. Sixteen respondents (53.3%) had lived mostly in the metropolitan area prior to commencing pre-service teacher education, with only eight (26.6%) of the respondents undertaking the STREP in their hometown. While the relatively low return rate does raise concerns with attempting to generalize the findings of this research, the proportion of males and females in the sample is reflective of those of the general teaching population (79% of primary school teachers are female according to McKenzie, Kos, Walker and Hong, 2008).

Part B of the questionnaire asked respondents to consider whether they would have applied for a country/remote location without the assistance provided by STREP and whether participation in STREP encouraged them to apply for a rural/remote teaching appointment. With respect to the first question marginally more of the sample (56.7%) indicated that they would have applied for a country/remote practicum without STREP assistance, and in a positive affirmation of STREP, twenty-two respondents (73.3%) indicated that participation in the program

encouraged them to apply for rural/remote teaching appointments.

Part C of the questionnaire asked participants to rate the degree to which they believed participation in STREP contributed to development of knowledge and skills related to living and teaching in rural/remote communities. Table 1 shows the percentage responses for the entire sample to the twenty-three items.

Table 1

Development of Knowledge and Skills about Living and Teaching in Rural/Remote Communities (Percentage Responses)

Item	1 SD	2 D	3 N	4 A	5 SA
The development of appropriate teaching/ learning strategies	3.3	0	16.7	56.7	23.3
Characteristics of students in rural/remote schools	0	6.7	3.3	40	50
Managing student behaviour	0	10	10	46.7	33.3
Teaching in multi-age classrooms	16.7	10	40	20	13.3
Support provided for teachers in rural/remote locations: e.g. District Office	10	13.3	16.7	36.7	23.3
Staff-student relationships in school	0	3.3	10	60	26.7
Staff-student relationships outside school	0	10	23.3	43.3	23.3
Community expectations of the school	0	6.7	16.7	50	26.7
The role of the school in the community	0	6.7	10	46.7	36.7
General operation of rural/remote schools	3.3	0	10	50	36.7
Staff-staff relationships in school	0	0	10	63.3	26.7
Staff-staff relationships outside school	0	3.3	10	53.3	33.3
Parent-student relationships	0	6.7	23.3	63.3	6.7
School expectations of teachers	0	6.7	20	43.3	30
Staff-parent relationships in school	0	16.7	16.7	53.3	13.3
Staff-parent relationships outside school	0	10	20	53.3	16.7
School resources	0	0	16.7	53.3	30
Community expectations of teachers outside school hours	0	10	23.3	53.3	13.3
Acceptance by the community	0	3.3	20	53.3	23.3
Participation in community activities (sport, clubs, etc)	0	6.7	20	50	23.3
Attitudes and values of people who live in rural/remote communities	0	0	13.3	60	26.7
Rural/remote lifestyle	0	0	16.7	46.7	36.7
Development of own living skills	10.3	6.9	24.1	20.7	37.9

Of the twenty-three items that respondents were asked to rate, only eight received percentage responses of 10 or more in the categories disagree or strongly disagree. Within these eight items, four exceeded 10%: teaching in multi-age classrooms (26.7%), support provided for teachers in rural/remote schools (23.3%), staff-parent relations in schools (16.7%) and development of own living skills (17.2%). Overwhelmingly, responses to the items were positive indicating that the STREP recipients believed that participating in the program contributed to the identified knowledge and skills about living and working in rural/remote areas.

A one-way ANOVA was performed on the five age groups and the twenty three items. Item 18 (community expectations of teachers outside school hours) was found to be significant ($p>.05$), but post-hoc Tukey analyses revealed no significant difference between the groups.

The data were also analyzed, using t-tests, by gender, by residential location prior to undertaking pre-service teacher education, and by whether the STREP practicum was undertaken in the home town in order to determine whether any significant differences were present.

When analyzed by gender the mean scores ranged from 3.00 (males–support provided for teachers in rural/remote areas) to 4.5 (males–characteristics of students in rural/remote schools and staff-staff relationships outside school). The mean scores show positive responses to each of the items, with t-tests indicating that females were more likely than males to report the development of skills and knowledge concerning community expectations of the school and the role of the school in the community ($p<.05$).

The mean scores, when analyzed by residential location prior to undertaking pre-service teacher education, ranged from 2.93 (females–teaching in multi-age classrooms) to 4.5

(males–characteristics of students in rural/remote schools). With the exception of the means scores for females on the item teaching in multi-age classrooms, all other item mean scores were above 3.0, repeating the overall positive rating for STREP participation contributing to knowledge and skills about living and working in rural/remote areas. T-tests found that participants who had previously lived in metropolitan areas were more likely to report the development of skills and knowledge about staff-staff relationships and acceptance by the community ($p<.05$).

Mean responses when analyzed by undertaking STREP in the hometown ranged from 2.95 (not in hometown for teaching in multi-age classrooms) to 4.45 (not teaching in hometown for learning about characteristics of students in rural/remote locations). Yet again, mean responses were overwhelmingly positive, with t-tests indicating that students who did not undertake STREP in their hometown were more likely to develop skills and knowledge concerning school resources ($p<.05$).

When asked to list and describe briefly issues that participation in the STREP does not adequately cover, respondents identified four broad issues: access to better accommodation, inadequate weekly stipend, and a lack of a support network. The fourth issue concerned the impression, gained from information on the (STREP) flyer that after graduation if a position was available in the district in which the practicum was completed the "STREP prac" student would get the job. This particular respondent indicated that, in this instance, this did not occur.

Summarizing Discussion

The STREP is a joint initiative between the WA Department of Education and Training and the WA Chamber of Minerals and Energy to provide financial support, which enables pre-service teachers to undertake their major practicum in a regional location. This study was the first relatively in-depth investigation into participants' perceptions about the usefulness of STREP participation in preparing them to live and work in rural or remote settings.

Four distinct themes emerged from the analysis of responses to the ways in which participants thought that the STREP might be improved. First, support where respondents commented on the desirability of establishing a peer support system and improving the level of university support. Second, finances with the provision of increased financial support being the basis of responses to this theme. The third theme was preparedness prior to the practicum, with participants suggesting that the preparation of an information booklet about living in country towns and increased liaison between the school and student prior to the practicum would be useful. In addition, one respondent commented "nothing can really prepare you for the reality of teaching in a remote location." The final theme was recognition, about which participants suggested linking successful completion of a STREP practicum with improved chances of gaining employment in the country and recognition by the university of participation in a STREP practicum (sometimes in very difficult circumstances).

Overall, the STREP participants who responded to the questionnaire were positive about the influence of this program in encouraging them to apply for a regional posting and developing skills and knowledge about living and teaching in rural and remote areas. Over half of the respondents had lived in metropolitan locations prior to entering pre-service teacher education and only one-quarter undertook the STREP practicum in their hometown. In addition, three-quarters indicated that participation in STREP encouraged them to seek regional teaching appointments. If these results are representative of the larger sample, then it would appear that the STREP is succeeding in encouraging program participants to seek regional teaching appointments. Such a result is pleasing, as the literature (CSC, 1987; Davis, 2002; Gibson, 1994; Halsey, 2005; HREOC, 2000; Moir & Gless, 2001; Murphy & Cross, 1990; Ramsey, 2000) has emphasized the desirability of providing pre-service teachers with rural practica experiences such that they might seek teaching positions in regional areas. Participation in STREP, according to the responses to this particular survey, seems to be providing pre-service teachers with authentic regional experiences, thereby ensuring the development of realistic expectations of living and working in country towns.

The responses regarding development of skills and knowledge about living and working in regional locations indicated that, for the respondents, STREP has been positive with respect to these two aspects. These responses are again pleasing, as the impact of the STREP appears to be consistent with recommendations and findings from previous research. Examples of such research include the Commonwealth Schools Commission (1988) report, which concluded that, prior to appointment; pre-service teachers need to be prepared for the challenges and conditions of teaching in rural areas. Second, participation in STREP might well be providing pre-service teachers with the skills and knowledge to succeed in their first posting, a recommendation emanating from the research of Moir and Gless (2001). Third, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Halsey (2005) who indicated that pre-service teachers acknowledged the importance of a rural practicum in their teacher preparation. Finally, participant responses in this study suggested that they had developed realistic expectations of living and working in regional locations, an issue identified as being important by Sharplin (2002) in the recruitment and retention of teachers to rural areas.

Positive aspects aside, comments from a few of the survey participants, indicate some criticisms of STREP participation, which might guide future directions of the program. As there were very few of these comments, the degree of generalizability is open to debate.

Comments related to accommodation standards, the perceived inadequacy of the weekly stipend, lack of a

support network, and the impression gained from the STREP flyer that should a vacancy arise in the district in which the practicum was completed, then that individual would be offered the position. Clearly, the first two of these comments are resourcing issues, which might be reviewed by the DET and Western Australia Chamber of Minerals and Energy, while the fourth comment suggests that clarification of the wording on the STREP flyer might require revision. The lack of a support network is an aspect that probably requires discussion between the DET and the participating universities, with the possibility of providing email addresses of all participants to facilitate peer contact and establishing clearly with whom the pre-service teacher should communicate regarding advice from the university, together with the number of visits, where practically possible, to the school.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The relatively low return rate (18.86%) casts some doubt as to the generalizability of the findings of this study. Nonetheless, 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.

A survey, similar to that conducted in the present study, should be considered, and possibly the DET might contemplate completion of such a questionnaire as a condition of participating in the STREP. Undoubtedly, rich data would also be obtained from a longitudinal study of STREP participants in their first few years of regional placement. In addition, and specifically with respect to the development of teaching skills, a comparative survey involving students undertaking their final practicum in metropolitan and regional locations might be considered.

Obtaining information from the mentor teachers is another possible future research direction. Their comments regarding issues associated directly with the logistical aspects of STREP, together with their opinions about working with pre-service teachers: for example, impact on workload, development of professional development skills, sources of recent information from university, contribution to student learning and allowing more time to be spent with individual children, should contribute to the development of this initiative.

The findings of this investigation suggest that the STREP should be continued, and if resources are available, expanded. With universities facing increasing restraints on resources, funding for any expansion of the STREP will probably need to reside in the corporate sector or local regional governments. The results of increasing the availability of regional placement practica opportunities, based on the findings of the present study, would seem to be beneficial for rural and remote communities.

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