

Developing a Rural Teacher Education Curriculum Package

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This paper documents the development of a new website (www.rrrtec.net.au) specifically designed to better equip teacher educators to prepare graduates to teach in rural and regional communities. The two year study (2009-2011) that informed the website's creation included three data sources: A literature review of research into rural teacher education, a survey of pre-service students who had completed a rural practicum and interviews with teacher educators about the current strategies they used to raise awareness and understanding of the needs of rural students, their families, and communities. An analysis of the data revealed that teacher educators need to focus more on developing graduates to be not only 'classroom ready' but also 'school and community ready'. This analysis provided the framework for the creation of a set of curriculum modules and resources including journal articles, film clips, websites and books that teacher educators could readily and publicly access and use in their own classroom teaching.

Key words: teacher education, rural education, professional learning, curriculum.

While there is a growing recognition of the need to prepare teachers to better understand student diversity in their classrooms, there is little focus on preparing teachers for the diversity of the contexts or communities in which these teachers might find themselves placed. Yet 'place' particularly matters when it comes to staffing. In North America as in Australia, rural schools face a greater pressure to attract and retain quality teachers than their urban counterparts (Allen & Malloy, 2007; Bryant, 2006; Green & Reid, 2004). In the Australian context, there currently exists an 'over supply' of teacher graduates; however, this supply does not filter through to the rural, regional and remote communities where they are needed most (Tibbetts, 2008). Simplistically, the further away and inland from an Australian capital city the more difficult it is to recruit and retain teachers. It does not appear that simply preparing *more* teachers is therefore the answer to the staffing needs of rural and regional communities. What is argued and documented in this paper is the need for a re-conceptualisation of teacher education curriculum and a more integrated approach between course work and the rural professional experience (practicum). Teacher education thus could be the key to solving rural, regional and remote staffing issues (White et al., 2008).

Australian Teacher Education Curriculum

Until most recently in the Australian context, the majority of universities have had little to no explicit focus on understanding rural or regional communities in their teacher education programs. They have had rather random and ad hoc rural professional experience (practicum) opportunities offered to their students. Students who do choose to take up a rural placement usually suffer the

financial burden as they travel and relocate to a new location for their practicum period. As a result the majority of students do not choose to complete a rural practicum (Halsey, 2005). While there does exist various Australian government financial incentives to encourage graduates to work in rural areas these are often not well understood by those who teach in the teacher education programs and thus, this valuable information is often left for pre-service teachers to uncover for themselves (see Reid et al., 2010; White et al., 2008).

It is clear that the lack of explicit information about rural teaching opportunities to pre-service teachers has meant that the needs of rural students, their families, and communities often remain invisible. Pre and in-service teachers are under prepared to be successful rural teachers and are thus unlikely to consider a future career teaching in rural areas.

This situation led to a study to address this issue with the brief to focus on the development of an inclusive, forward thinking, rural teacher education curriculum package aimed at specifically preparing teachers for diverse rural and regional communities. The two year Australian study on which this paper reports, is now known as RRRTEC (Renewing Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum) and the history of the work is provided below to outline the study's aims, the methodology, findings and the building of the RRRTEC website which houses a range of resources designed to be used by teacher educators. The website can be found at www.rrrtec.net.au.

The RRRTEC Study

Over four years ago, a team of teacher education researchers across Australia came together to investigate the issue of recruitment and retention of teachers for rural sustainability. Two national projects grew from this meeting. In 2008, the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded project *Teacher Education for Rural and Regional Australia* (TERRAnova) began and in 2009 the *Rural and Regional Teacher Education Curriculum* (RRRTEC) project was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). Both projects have built from each other and as such, a rich model of theory-practice-policy nexus has emerged.

Building on the research and findings of TERRAnova that highlighted that a largely metro-centric 'one size fits all' model of teacher education was not sufficient in meeting the needs of rural teachers, the RRRTEC project looked at what teacher education could do differently to prepare teachers for the rural workforce. RRRTEC has aimed to develop a teacher education curriculum that is both inclusive of rural education needs and makes visible rural and regional teacher education research, curriculum resources, and pedagogical strategies for teacher education students. A centralised rural and regional resource repository, the website, has been developed to assist teacher educators in the preparation of pre-service teachers for working in rural and regional schools.

The study attempted to focus on uncovering the differences experienced by those who worked in rural contexts to establish particular gaps in knowledge and experience that teacher educators could better address and questions such as 'what should teacher education teach to better meet the needs of rural students, their families and communities?'

Data Collected

The RRRTEC website resource has been developed from three main data sources. The first a literature search and analysis of the key research projects in Australia into rural (teacher) education over the last two decades (1990-2010); secondly a large longitudinal Australian survey of pre-service teachers who participated in a rural practicum experience (2008 -2010) as part of the TERRAnova project and thirdly in depth interviews with teacher educators (n=30) across Australia to investigate their knowledge about the needs of rural students and what strategies they currently use in preparing teachers for rural communities. Each data source is discussed below.

Literature Review

The literature review revealed a growing number of studies into the field of rural teacher education. Large Australian related studies in this area, include: the Rural [Teacher] Education Project (R[T]EP) (Green, 2008), funded as an Australian Research Council Linkage joint project involving the New South Wales Department of Education and Training, Charles Sturt University and the University of New England from 2002-2005; the National Survey of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education in Rural and Regional Australia (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006); Staffing an empty schoolhouse: attracting and retaining teachers in rural, remote and isolated communities study conducted by the New South Wales Teachers Federation, (Roberts, 2005); the Rural Education Forum of Australia's 'Pre-Service Country Teaching Costings Survey' (Halsey, 2005); and most recently the three year (2008-2010) ARC funded project, TERRAnova. These and smaller localised studies paint a particular picture of the issues facing teachers and pre-service teachers working and living in rural communities.

Roberts (2005), in his report *Staffing the Empty Schoolhouse*, confirmed that Australia's remote, rural and regional schools are frequently staffed with young, inexperienced teachers and teacher turnover is high. Distance from family, geographic isolation, weather, and limited shopping were all reported among the main reasons teachers gave for leaving rural areas (Collins, 1999). Halsey (2005) specifically explored the impact for pre-service teachers taking up a rural practicum experience, and highlighted the additional 'social and economic costs' pre-service teachers encountered in completing a rural professional experience. Sharplin (2002) examined the perceptions of taking up a rural career from the perspective of pre-service teachers and uncovered that for many, fears about access to resources, isolation, and cultural differences were associated with teaching in rural areas. These fears were believed to be the cause of an unwillingness to consider a future rural career, or even to trial a teacher education incentive program. Other studies (Collins, 1999; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; McClure, Redfield & Hammer, 2003) indicated further reasons for rural staffing shortages due to teachers' (both pre-service and in-service) beliefs about geographical, social, cultural, and professional isolation; inadequate housing; and a lack of preparation for rural multi-age classrooms.

Classroom burnout appeared to trigger an exodus from rural classrooms as reported in an Australian newspaper: "Younger teachers point to issues such as overwork, pay structures, being put on contract without assurance of permanency,

community expectations, student management and lack of social status” (The Age as cited in Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 67) as reasons for leaving rural areas.

Further research undertaken by Starr and White (2008) indicated that beginning teachers in rural schools and communities were more likely to deal with real *and* imagined perceptions of personal and professional isolation and questions about access to professional learning and teaching resources, than their urban colleagues. Work conditions such as increased levels of visibility in the community; requirements to teach ‘out of area’, and early professional advancement to positions of leadership without preparation at an earlier stage in their careers all appeared to result in considerable personal and professional demands on them as teachers for which they identified they were not always prepared. Each of these studies highlights some of the differences for teachers working in rural communities and signifies that the design of teacher education curriculum needs to better equip graduates for these diverse contexts. Halsey (2005) urgently recommended teacher education programs to develop policies to increase significantly the number of pre-service country teaching placements with the view that this might encourage beginning teachers to consider a rural career. Rural practicum however is only one component of a teacher education program and to seriously address teacher shortage and staffing churn, White and Reid (2008) argued for a closer connection between the course work and the practicum itself requiring teacher educators to take responsibility for the periods of preparation before and after the rural practicum.

Pre-service Surveys

Alongside the literature review, pre-service teacher surveys (n=263) and teacher educator interviews (n=30) also informed the RRRTEC resource development. Pre-service students who completed a rural placement (August 2008 - December 2010) as part of their degree were invited to complete an on-line survey. The survey instrument was designed to investigate the views of how well prepared the pre-service teachers were to complete the practicum by their teacher education program and what improvements could be made. The survey analysis revealed that pre-service teachers wanted more information about how to build and sustain relationships with parents and other professions beyond the classroom and the school and into the community and they wanted to know more about meeting the needs of learners in multi-age settings. They wanted more information about the places they were going to and how to cope in a highly visible profession. They also wanted more time to share, debrief and discuss with their lecturers and their classmates about what they had learnt about

teaching from the experience. They wanted more strategies about working with diverse learners, particularly indigenous students. The survey responses supported the earlier study by Halsey (2005) and it was clear that any subsidies were not sufficient full cost recovery for the students. The majority who went to a rural school placement described wanting to try a different location and experience.

Although the surveys revealed more that could be done from the teacher education program they also strongly indicated that a successful rural practicum experience led to the graduate thinking positively about applying for a rural placement. Unfortunately, the survey numbers revealed only small percentages of all pre-service teachers taking up a rural practicum opportunity.

Semi-structured Teacher Educator Interviews

The third source of data used by the RRRTEC project were semi-structured interviews of teacher educators across Australia (n=30). A number of teacher educators responded positively to the invitation to participate in the study but expressed that they felt ill equipped to respond to the questions. Interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2011. The interview questionnaire featured seven open-ended items exploring questions such as:

- What do you think are the distinctive features of preparing a student teacher for a rural career?
- Where in your teacher education course (if any) do you believe rural curriculum should be embedded?
- What would you see as key or essential content to learn about if you knew your student teacher were to take a rural teaching position?
- What are the professional learning needs of teacher educators to deliver a rural teacher education curriculum?

Responses revealed two distinct groups. The first comprised a group of teacher educators who felt they were able to discuss the needs of rural teachers, usually based on their own experiences and because they had taught in rural settings themselves; the second group of teacher educators described themselves with no rural experience or knowledge from which to draw and who described themselves as ill-equipped to respond to the questions as a whole although they attempted to. This clear lack of teacher educators’ ability to respond to the questions and discuss the needs of rural students meant that the number of interviews were limited and highlights the need for more professional learning for teacher educators about rural and regional communities.

From those teacher educators who were able to respond comprehensively to the questions, the findings that emerged from the interviews were similar to those from the pre-service survey data: Interviewees recognized the important work of rural teachers in their communities. A number of teacher educators had created resources to better prepare their students for thinking about a rural placement. Some teacher educators had developed rural and remote field trips and simulations; others had created videos to showcase the views of beginning rural teachers. The interview data about successful strategies proved a valuable tool when it came to collating resources to be housed within the RRRTEC website.

Identifying Themes

Key themes of the differences of working in rural and regional contexts emerged from across the data sources. Understanding the knowledge and skills required to work in a particular rural place appeared vital for new graduates' preparation. The visibility of teachers working in a smaller town was also identified in the data. As Reid et al. (2009) observed, "the reality and nature of working in rural communities is that the distances between towns and settlements means teachers must live alongside or close to the children and families that they serve" (p. 3). Survey responses highlight the need for pre-service teachers to be better prepared and equipped to understand the very public face of a teacher working in a small town. One respondent noted:

They [future teachers] need to realise that when they are going into a rural community or a remote community, it can be very small and very different from living in a large metropolitan area where they can blend in and live in one suburb and go and teach in another and no-one necessarily knows anything about their life. In a rural community, student teachers are basically in the eyes of the community all the time so they have to be very professional in what they do both socially and professionally.

Pre-service teachers need to know that rural communities perceive rural teachers as leaders earlier on in their careers than their urban colleagues. Thus, teachers in rural areas must view themselves as leaders within the community as well as have the ability to communicate with a range of different 'stakeholders' in a language that can break down rather than create barriers to educational choice and opportunity. The rural school is often identified as the traditional heart of its community; often it operates at the focus point of external economic and social influences, as well

as political requirements for change and renewal. Therefore, the rural school frequently functions as the barometer of community well-being (Halsey, 2005). Further, Halsey notes the school is often the largest organization in a town or area, and thus it is often "strategically positioned to be a rallying agency when the town feels under pressure, providing a sense of connection to the past, present, and the future" (p. 6). Understanding place and community are therefore important answers to the question what knowledge is of most worth in preparing teachers for rural communities? Teachers who want to be successful in a rural/remote context need to be prepared to teach students from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to themselves. They need to approach the decision to teach in a rural community by looking at the benefits of the community rather than from a deficit viewpoint (Thompson, 2002). They need to acknowledge and match learning experiences that significantly build on the rich and diverse lives of rural and regional students; to be prepared to teach different developmental stages and ages in any one learning experience or classroom setting. Rural teachers also need to know how to work in teams using technology to develop their own professional learning. While all of these skills, understanding, and knowledge might arguably be necessary for all teachers, their value is increased for those who work in rural, regional and remote contexts.

Developing the Conceptual Framework

The data analysis and themes revealed that teacher education programs require a curriculum developed with an understanding of diversity of contexts, including an understanding of rurality and all that it means in terms of living and working in different rural, remote and regional places and contexts. Based on the rich array of studies and data collection and analysis from both TERRAnova and RRRTEC, as well as from close consultation with the reference group of RRRTEC, which included fellow academics, practitioners and policy makers, a conceptual framework was developed (White, 2010).

The conceptual framework developed highlighted that the preparation of (rural) teachers needed to encompass three overlapping fields of the classroom, school and community. In each field a focus on the teachers' work and the student learning is important. This working framework in turn underpinned the module and resource development.

The current focus on classroom readiness *alone* clearly is problematic in preparing teachers to work in rural schools and their communities. The heavy focus on classroom preparation that permeates current models of teacher education is at

odds with a broader view of teaching that locates the work of a teacher in the wider school community. Prospective teachers for rural areas need to develop a tri-focus, that is, an understanding of the links between the classroom, the school, and the wider rural community and their place across these three different contexts—a different set of issues from those that the traditional model of a teacher education and professional experience currently provides.

Creating the RRRTEC Resource

Using the conceptual framework of the fields of classroom, school and community, five areas were selected to focus on. A range of strategies related to how to work collaboratively with colleagues, school support staff, other professionals and community-based personnel to enhance student learning and wellbeing in rural and regional communities were then developed. The five areas are:

1. Experiencing rurality
2. Community readiness
3. Whole school focus
4. Student learning and the classroom
5. Preparing for a rural career

Each focus area is described in the website and is unpacked in terms of key theories and concepts for teacher educators to consider in their classroom teaching. The model of the *rural social space* (Reid et al., 2010) which has been developed as part of the TERRAnova project for example is provided under the focus area of 'Experiencing rurality'. The rural social space model can inform how pre-service teachers can think about places to which they are going from the three aspects - demography, geography and economy. A series of resources is also provided in each area for example film clips of rural teachers discussing their place, to photographs and images of different rural places, to virtual and simulated places on the website. All are offered for teacher educators to show their students how they can learn about diversity of place and how they might prepare pre-service teachers to find out more about a rural location they might be placed to.

The curriculum writing team used the themes and areas to develop a series of modules (activities and resources) and outcomes for pre-service teachers. The modules collectively aim to prepare pre-service teachers to:

- know and understand the diverse distinctions between definitions of metropolitan, rural and regional communities as they relate to educational policy, resourcing and experience.

- know, understand, and appreciate how community change and renewal impacts upon rural and regional education.
- know, and understand historical and contemporary issues and policies related to educational provision, specifically with regard to the employment and retention of teachers in rural and regional contexts.
- know about, understand, and have considered strategies to access information relating to community and school roles and expectations in rural and regional contexts.
- know about, understand, and have considered strategies to work and live successfully in a rural or regional context.
- know about and have strategies to work collaboratively with colleagues, school support staff, other professionals and community-based personnel to enhance student learning and wellbeing in rural and regional contexts.
- appreciate the opportunities and challenges of teaching in rural and regional contexts.

The areas and modules are briefly outlined below.

1. Experiencing Rurality

Module 1 - Understanding rurality

2. Community readiness

Module 2 - Understanding place

3. Whole school focus

Module 3 - Understanding rural teacher identity and teachers' work

Module 4 - Understanding working with rural and regional communities

4. Student learning and the classroom

Module 5 - Getting to know rural students' lives

Module 6 - Professional Experience: Modes - Guest speaker, Remote contact, Simulation and scenario, Site visits, Field trips and Practicum

5. Preparing for a rural career

Module 7 - Advice for working rural/regional settings

Each module draws from theory and provides practical activities. For example, as the data highlight, further concepts such as teacher identity, leadership, and professional learning are important in thinking through how rural teachers connect with their colleagues both within the whole school context, across schools, and within their communities. It appears imperative from the data sources that there is an emphasis on leadership skills and an ability to communicate across sectors. As professional learning opportunities are reported

to be more difficult for rural and regional teachers due to access and geographic isolation, a more explicit teacher education curriculum that prepares graduates to mobilise their own professional learning by working closely with teacher and community mentors and requires the use of technology to support professional learning is needed. In Module 3, 4 and 7 these concepts are explored in teaching scenarios.

A series of modes within Module 6, Professional experience, has also been developed. The modes refer to different approaches to experience learning about rural places, for example field trips, simulations and scenarios, or listening to guest speakers. While the physical experience of completing a rural practicum cannot be replaced, a series of modes of learning have been offered to provide teacher educators with different ways to assist pre-service students learn about rural teaching. One mode, for example, provides short film clips of experienced rural principals providing advice for future rural teachers on working and living in rural communities. Another mode focuses on simulations in order to connect coursework to the practicum. All resources such as the film clips and simulations have been designed to be quickly

accessible and linked to each mode via the website in university classrooms.

Conclusion

This paper has documented the development of a teacher education curriculum package to better prepare teachers for rural communities. The different phases of the study show the rich theoretical and conceptual development on which the curriculum modules, modes, and teaching resources were created. The next phase of the work will focus on the professional learning of teacher educators to know about the resource and have the opportunity to use the materials in their classrooms.

The website is newly launched and it is hoped that further activities and resources will be added over time. The authors of this paper are keen to hear about how the website is used and what improvements can be made by those interested scholars and researchers in all countries. This can be done by going to the website www.rrrtec.net.au and completing the survey link on the bottom left corner on the homepage.

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