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‘Over The Hill’ is not so far away: Crossing teaching contexts to create benefits for all through rural teaching experiences.

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining quality teachers to rural and remote areas has been a challenge over the last decade. Many preservice teachers are reluctant to experience a rural and remote practicum and may not consider applying to teach in such areas when they graduate. Education departments and universities need to explore innovative ways that will encourage graduates to consider undertaking a teaching position in the bush. As a way forward, preservice teachers from a regional campus of a Queensland University were invited to participate in a six-day rural experience entitled ‘Over the Hill’ that included being billeted with local families, participating in community activities and observing and teaching in classrooms.

Fifteen preservice teachers were accompanied by two university academics who returned to work in a classroom as teacher for their own rural and remote professional experience. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore and describe the perceptions of a rural and remote teaching experience from the perspectives of the preservice teachers, the accompanying academics and the school staff hosting the program. Data were collected from the preservice teachers and accompanying academics in the form of written reflections while fourteen school staff completed a related questionnaire.

The results indicated that a six-day rural and remote teaching program can provide professional benefits for all involved, preservice teachers, accompanying academics and the school staff hosting the program. Indeed, this study indicates that short experiences such as “Over the Hill” not only assist preservice teachers to make informed decisions about teaching in rural and remote areas but can provide professional benefits for accompanying academics and the schools.

Introduction

Rural Australia has suffered from droughts both climatically and educationally. In the last decade, both of these factors have effected the economic and employment welfare of its states and territories as a large proportion of their school students depend on the attraction and retention of quality teachers to rural and often remote areas for their schooling needs (Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1999; Green & Reid, 2004; McConaghy, Lloyd, Hardy & Jenkins, 2005; White & Reid, 2008). As part of a worldwide trend (McEwan, 1999) the teaching profession, which currently has been at its most powerful in effectiveness and commitment, is facing a teacher shortage, exacerbated by the retirement of the ‘baby boomer’ generation (MCEETYA, 2004). This situation is deemed to increase in the coming years with shortages being reported in the associated areas of rural school leaders (Mulford, 2003) and specialist teaching areas, in particular science and mathematics (Harris & Farrell, 2007; Williams, 2005).

Country areas, especially those deemed as rural and remote, have been traditionally harder to staff since the introduction of the free, secular and compulsory education in the mid-nineteenth century

(Halsey, 2006). Rural and remote schools are usually the first to feel disadvantaged in regards to staffing (Australian Education Union, 2000; Gregson, Waters, & Gruppetta, 2006) with shortages in relief teachers emerging as a critically burdensome issue (White, Green, Reid, Hastings & Cooper, 2008). Schools in these areas are crying out for more local personnel to replace teachers who are sick or take leave. The Australian Education Union (AEU) firmly places the responsibility on government policies, which have recently decreased funding to Australian universities. These policies effectively reduce the monies that are spent on offering scholarships to attract graduates from country areas into teacher education, supporting urban-born preservice teachers to experience the practice of teaching in the rural and remote and then attracting new teachers to these areas with packages and promises of movement to more desired locations. These policies do nothing for teacher retention in the bush. The AEU decries all of these restraining challenges and notes that further hindrances exist because of the international teacher demand that entices well-trained Australian graduands overseas with more lucrative packages than the home-grown varieties.

In the last decade, advocacy for an equitable share of quality teachers and services, which they need and deserve in the bush, emerged through strategic groups (e.g., Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA)) and associations who have provided a much more strategic if not strident voice for country school needs. Due to this raising of consciousness, government agencies have examined and reported on places in Australia that have substantial rural populations and have a relatively underdeveloped infrastructure for comprehensive schooling. The earlier work of the Schooling in Rural Australia (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988) and Towards a national education and training strategy for rural Australia, (National Board of Employment, Education and Training for Rural Australia, 1991) have been supplemented by more recent reports - Quality Matters: Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices (Ramsey, 2000); and the National Inquiry into rural and remote education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). These reports emphasise the issues around rural and remote schools and call for strategies that highlight the promotion, recruitment and retention of staff to create an equitable education for students attending schools within these districts.

Boylan (2004) concurs with the National Board of Employment, Education and Training for Rural Australia (1991) that outlines suggestions for preservice teacher education which should address the lower rural participation rates. Relevant recommendations include the need for university students to be given financial support to engage in a rural and remote practicum with the added benefit of other monies to supplement payment for accommodation (both at home and in the rural community), special living rates for residing in the communities and specific programs aimed at teaching indigenous students. These suggestions are in line with, but more forthright than those advocated by the the HREOC report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000a) that purported all teacher-training institutions should require their students to study a module on rural and remote communities and offer them a fully funded practicum experience. Ramsey (2000) confirms the views noted in the HREOC report but extends this notion by stressing the need for incentive programs and packages for attracting and retaining graduate teachers to the bush.

In Queensland, where over half of all state schools and approximately a third of all students enrolled in state schools are located in rural and remote areas, it is vital that research continues into the promotion and retention of quality teachers to those areas. Researchers at Queensland University of Technology both past (Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999) and present (Hudson & Hudson, 2008) have investigated how the attitudes of early career teachers are formed and framed from the dispelling of myths of teaching in rural settings through hands-on experiences in rural and remote locations. Both of these teams have gone into the bush with their preservice teachers, investigated and listened to the voices of the country communities and the city-bred students simultaneously. The planned outcomes for both sets of preservice teachers were a demonstrated,

deeper understanding of life and work within a rural and remote community and a willingness to return to rural and remote schools for employment.

The question for higher education institutions of how to address the situation that only a small proportion of teacher education students are drawn from their regional home towns into the metropolis to study to become teachers is critical in accepting that their student population has to be sold on country living and teaching. In resonating with the lists of needs of preservice teachers and early career teachers, preparation programs must address a myriad of perceived deficiencies. Some of the most prevalent of these needs (Gibson & King, 1998, Sharplin, 2002) are pedagogies for multi-age classes and strategies, rural classroom organisation and small school administrative responsibilities, accessing appropriate and sufficient resources; strategies for successful community interaction; understanding community dynamics (Hudson & Hudson, 2009); isolation; developing communication and interaction networks with colleagues (Yarrow, Herschell & Millwater, 1999).

To design a study program in which all teacher education students will partake is different from making a rural and remote practicum compulsory. Volunteers are usually best suited to committing to such an experience as they are self motivated for professional development. The question of whether everyone is suited to teaching in rural and remote schools can be sorted by preservice teachers “trying before they are forced into buying”. Having the opportunity to participate in a rural and remote experience will provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to further develop their professional identity for teaching (Millwater, 2009). Cooper, Sim and Jervis-Tracey (2006) use Wenger’s concepts (2000) about communities of practice to show how some preservice teachers do not categorise themselves as a teacher who will fit in to a rural and remote community. Wenger (2000, p. 239) states “in the landscape of communities and boundaries in which we live, we identify with some communities strongly and not at all with others. We identify with who we are by what is familiar and what is foreign, by what we know and what we can safely ignore....” It is therefore critical that if teacher retention is to be achieved in the bush, then beginning teacher identity should be investigated to ensure suitability before commencing work in a rural and remote community. Halsey (2006), in exploring his own story, drew up a spatial self-help map for teachers to navigate and negotiate living, being and working in rural spaces and places. Halsey stresses how ‘fitting in’ is a variable and idiosyncratic concept.

In searching for a comprehensive literature base on rural and remote programs regarding the support for developing quality preservice teachers who work in rural and remote areas (Gibson & King, 1998; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1999; Boylan, 2004; McClure & Reeves, 2004), it is indeed still sparse even though initiatives, which accommodate the social and professional differences associated with such work, are on the increase. Ten years ago, Gibson and King in their survey of 27 national universities found that 91% had a rural focus in their courses but what that meant was not necessarily that any students were immersed (White, Green, Reid, Lock, Hastings & Cooper, 2008), in a real and live experience of being ‘in the bush’ or beyond the fringes of their own backyards. In spite of knowing that many non-rural teachers may feel insecure, ignorant of country ways and tentative about accepting a position in a rural and remote school without previous authentic teaching experience (Roberts, 2005), the implementation of such specific programs in teacher education in higher education institutions are still under-funded. Such programs are usually instigated by teams of researchers who are passionate about teaching and have a desire to propagate quality professional development and career outcomes for their preservice teachers.

With adequate funding, the notion of partnerships between higher education institutions and employers of teachers can be established to better articulate methods of attracting, selecting and recruiting teachers for rural and remote schools. As demonstrated in Queensland University of Technology’s (Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1997) initiative involving

remote small schools in south–east, north-east and north- west Queensland, in partnership with the Education Department, district schools, the Board of Teacher Registration, the Queensland Teachers’ Union and Priority Country Area Program (PCAP), interns spent 6 weeks sharing the demanding work of a rural and remote learning experience. The internship served as the transition into future rural and remote teaching as each of the interns was offered employment in a country school.

Initiatives such as that outlined in the article "Let me have my own pigeon hole and copying number: Developing partnerships in rural and remote schools" (Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1997) provide preservice teachers with the first-hand experience required for them to make informed choices about teaching and living in a rural and remote community. Furthermore, such programs assist preservice teachers to develop the professional identity to live and teach in rural and remote communities. Programs that support “real world’ rural and remote teaching experiences for preservice teachers can affect or influence a particular group within the total student cohort of a course (Jackiewicz, Lincoln & Brockman, 1998). Although the affect of such initiatives may be small in regards to preservice teacher numbers, such programs can assist preservice teachers to make educated decisions about teaching in rural and remote areas that may alleviate many of the problems associated with the retention of early career teachers in the bush (Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1997).

Context

This study is set at a small regional campus of a university in Queensland. In 2006 focus group meetings were conducted with ten Bachelor of Education (primary) preservice teachers across the first two years of their degree. At the time, the number of preservice teachers participating in the focus group meetings represented 12.5% of the total cohort. The aim of the focus group meetings was to ascertain whether preservice teachers from this campus would be prepared to undertake a rural remote field studies (practicum) placement or seek future employment in a rural and remote setting. The findings of the focus group meetings revealed that of the ten preservice teachers only one would be prepared to undertake a rural and remote field study, with no students indicating they would seek future employment in such a location. The following response is indicative of the focus group members.

I really don’t want to teach in a rural and remote setting. I have heard that the schools have no resources, it’s lonely and I like to have a social life. I haven’t been more than 20 minutes from the coast in my life. I wouldn’t have a clue what to expect. I wouldn’t want to go out west for a prac because I might hate it and be stuck there for four weeks.

It became apparent from the findings of the focus group meetings that to overcome teacher shortages in rural and remote areas, preservice teachers need to gain “real world” experience and be educated about living and teaching in such settings. Reluctance to undertake a four-week practicum in such a location meant the design of a new approach. As a way forward, principals in the Miles / Condamine area, who shared concerns about teacher shortages in their district, invited preservice teachers from the campus to participate in a rural and remote experience to be entitled ‘Over the Hill’. In 2007 seventeen preservice teachers volunteered to participate in the five-day ‘Over the Hill’ experience. Preservice teachers were billeted with local families, participated in community activities (e.g. touch football, Rock Eisteddfod rehearsals, and parent / community barbecue, visit to the local environmental centre) and taught or assisted at the local school. Recommendations from the 2007 ‘Over the Hill’ program suggested that more in-school time was required (see Hudson & Hudson, 2008). In its inaugural year, the program confirmed a strong partnership between the campus and staff in the Miles and Condamine area and as a result it was decided that the 2008 “Over the Hill’ program would be extended to six days with two accompanying academics returning to classrooms for their own rural and remote teaching experience. By returning academics

to the classroom, they would gain recent experience of teaching in such settings and be better equipped to prepare preservice teachers in the future (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003).

Method

This study focused upon data collected from the 2008 ‘Over the Hill’ program. The aim of the study was to explore and describe the perceptions of a rural and remote teaching experience from the perspectives of the preservice teachers, the accompanying academics and the school staff hosting the program.

This interpretive study employed qualitative methods of data collection as it was concerned with the perspectives of the participants (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). Preservice teachers wishing to volunteer for the program were asked to email an expression of interest outlining their reasons for participation. It was hoped that the email communication would highlight their perceptions of rural and remote teaching prior to participating in the program.

Following the experience, preservice teachers and the participating academics completed written reflections to note their perceptions of the program. School staff, hosting the preservice teachers, provided data in the way of a completed questionnaire at the conclusion of the program. It was hoped that the written reflections combined with the questionnaires would elicit responses that would demonstrate:

- The perceptions of the preservice teachers after completing the six-day ‘Over the Hill’ program;
- The value of the program from the perspectives of the preservice teachers, the accompanying academics and the school staff; and
- Feedback from the participants in regards to the future of the ‘Over the Hill’ program.

The data gathered from all participants were collated and compared. The emerging themes from the preservice teachers and academics reflections, and the questionnaires gathered from the school staff, were noted and coded to record commonalities and differences. Once complete, the data analysis was reviewed by another academic to ensure the validity of the coding and the emerging themes. By seeking advice from another academic, the results of the data could be ensured (Neuman, 2000).

Results

Nineteen preservice teachers (7 males and 12 females) sent expressions of interest via email to participate in the 2008 ‘Over the Hill’ program. Four students who had participated in the 2007 program responded wishing to be involved again. One preservice teacher noted “I would love to go again. I had a great time. Can you let me know if students are able to attend twice?” An email was sent to prospective participants noting that due to limited numbers, preservice teachers who had previously participated could not apply again.

Fifteen preservice teachers (5 males and 10 females) were successful in their applications to attend. Reasons for attending varied with nine preservice teachers noting they would like to explore their options for future teaching prospects. A typical response was:

When I graduate I am seriously considering applying for a teaching position in a rural community. The opportunity to experience a rural and remote community with the scaffolding of this program would be extremely valuable, allowing insight to the life style of a rural setting.

One student noted as part of a scholarship program she was expected to teach in a rural and remote setting and saw this as an excellent opportunity to experience the lifestyle in a small township. She wrote:

I am very keen to attend the 'Over the Hill' program as I am a recipient of a scholarship which stipulates that I am to teach in a rural/remote area for 4 years after graduating from Uni. I believe that any experience which I gain teaching in a rural/remote setting will be highly beneficial for my future career.

Four students noted they would like to attend as they heard the 2007 program was a rewarding experience and, although they had not considered teaching in a rural and remote setting, it would be a valuable experience. A typical response was:

I heard that this program was really enjoyable last year. I don't think I want to go out west at the end of my degree but maybe this will change my mind. For me, participating in the Over the Hill experience is all about gathering as much understanding as possible about teaching in a rural and remote community. I am wondering if this will change my mind.

One participant noted her concerns about being in a rural and remote area and her lack of experience living away from the coastline. She felt that this program would be beneficial in assisting her to form decisions about teaching in the bush. This participant noted:

I am petrified of doing my rural or remote service as a teacher!! I have never been west of a stones throw to the beach, and in my head, I envisage dust, dirt, loneliness and boredom! I would like to participate in the 'Over the Hill' experience so that I can be proved wrong about my preconceptions.

Following the program the written reflections from the preservice teachers revealed that all fifteen preservice teachers enjoyed the experience and thirteen would consider teaching in a rural and remote area. A typical response was:

The program really broadened my horizons in terms of what I initially thought rural and remote teaching would be like. The experience of being immersed in the small community-oriented area and going to the school as an 'outsider' being welcomed and accepted by both students and teachers was really good— my perceptions of teaching and living in a rural and remote area have changed since the experience. I would now consider applying for such a position at the conclusion of my degree.

One preservice teacher noted that although she enjoyed the experience, she would need to complete a rural and remote practicum in order to be convinced to apply to teach in such an area. She stated

I think after completing a practicum I would be more informed about teaching in a rural and remote area. The 'Over the Hill' trip only gave us a snapshot. A longer length of time (4 week practicum) spent in the school and surrounding community would help in the decision.

Another preservice teacher felt that he may find the isolation difficult if sent to such a remote location and was not convinced he would apply for such a position.

I am not entirely sure that I would consider teaching in a rural or remote area. After spending three days in a school that was so far away from anything, I realised just how isolated it can make you feel from family and friends.

The collation of the data from all the participants (i.e., 15 preservice teachers, 2 accompanying academics and 14 teachers and school staff) at the completion of the program revealed there were benefits for all involved in ‘Over the Hill’. Preservice teachers noted that they gained knowledge about teaching in a rural and remote area, however, they also purported there were other benefits gained that would further assist their development as teachers. A summary of the benefits noted by the preservice teachers and the number who noted a similar response are recorded in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Preservice teachers perspective: Benefits of the ‘Over the Hill’ program.

Perceived benefits	Number of participants who noted this response
Gained a deeper understanding of teaching in a rural community	15
Experienced rural teachers lifestyles in a rural community	14
Learned from teachers the pro’s and con’s of teaching in a rural community	7
Experienced teaching in a multi-grade classroom	9
Gained an understanding of how small rural/remote schools operate	15
Learned ways that schools can work with parents and the community	14
Formed closer bonds with fellow peers and academic staff involved in the program	8
Learned about the history and general knowledge about the district	5
Gained further teaching experience	10
Gained reassurance that country life isn’t BORING and completely disengaged from the technological world	8
Experienced working with students with special needs	3
Formed networks with teachers in rural and remote schools	11
Noted differences between rural schools and metropolitan schools	7
Experienced the abundance of resources available in rural and remote schools (including books, videos, television resources, musical Instruments, prep grade learning materials as well as computer access and physical education equipment such as long jump pits and tennis courts)	11
Gained knowledge about teaching by engaging in educational conversations with school staff	9

All fourteen teachers that hosted the preservice teachers noted that involvement in the ‘Over the Hill’ experience was “positive”. Ten of the fourteen teachers commented that there were benefits for all involved i.e. the school students, the teachers and the preservice teachers. One of the principals commented:

Being involved in the ‘Over the Hill’ program was a positive experience for all involved. From my perspective, the preservice teachers gained knowledge about teaching in a small rural school, the staff provided teaching advice to the preservice teachers which encouraged them to reflect on their own practice and, the students at my school enjoyed experiencing the varied teaching approaches and enthusiasm provided by the student teachers.

A teacher whose school hosted an accompanying academic noted there were benefits for the staff at having the expertise of the visitor on the staff for the six days. Although the opportunity for the academic to teach in the classroom was the main objective, the unexpected outcome was the school gained professional development through conversations that assisted the teachers to “gain knowledge about Queensland Curriculum and Reporting Framework and assessment strategies they could employ in their classrooms. In one conversation around the lunch table she gave us ideas and suggestions for assessment that we had been struggling with for a term”.

Just as the preservice teachers and school staff noted the benefits of the program, so did the two accompanying academics that commented that the program was beneficial. In particular, they noted that the time spent in someone else's classroom was challenging as the teacher had set ideas about teaching approaches, particular content needed to be covered and the teacher liked the academics to employ already existing management strategies. The academics likened their classroom experience to those of the preservice teachers during practicum and concluded that they gained greater understanding of the preservice teachers field studies experiences. Furthermore, they noted that by undertaking classroom teaching the experience had enhanced their ability to prepare preservice teachers for classroom practice. In particular they noted they were forced to revisit effective management strategies, the importance of planning and gained knowledge about available on-line resources for teachers. Below are two excerpts from their reflections that are indicative of their thoughts.

...my teaching experience allowed for insight into what a pre-service teacher experiences when she/he has to pick up an unfamiliar class from the regular teacher and teach a lesson in synch with the remainder of the curriculum.

I think this experience will enhance my ability to prepare preservice teachers to teach in rural schools, furthermore, it made me realise that academics in teacher education really benefit from going back to the classroom. Further benefits I gained were realising how challenging it can be to teach in someone else's class. The classroom teacher had a set approach that worked really well but I found it hard to maintain that approach for consistency in the classroom. I also remembered tried and trusted management techniques that I'll share with the preservice teachers in my classes next semester.

The final collation of the data also revealed that the participants, including the preservice teachers, accompanying academics and the school staff ($n=31$) recommended the 'Over the Hill' program continue. One of the teachers noted "please keep this program going. It not only benefits the preservice teachers but also us as teachers, as we get to share ideas and find out the new ideas being implemented at the universities". The enthusiasm for the program to continue was shared by the preservice teachers whose most common comments included "Over the Hill is a great opportunity that should be available to all preservice teachers. Please keep it going." The accompanying academics agreed the program should continue with further classroom experiences provided for academics. "I recommend this program continue with further opportunities for academics to return to the classroom. I also think the university should explore further programs that provide 'real world' classroom teaching experiences for teacher educators".

Discussion and conclusion

Attracting and retaining teachers in rural and remote settings continues to be a challenge (Yarrow et al., 1998; Green & Reid, 2004; McConaghy, Lloyd, Hardy & Jenkins, 2005). Education departments, schools and universities need to work in collaboration so that programs are developed that provide preservice teachers with 'real world' experiences of living and working in the bush. By providing such experiences, preservice teachers have the opportunity to ascertain if they identify with life in rural and remote communities (Wenger, 2000 cited in Cooper, Sim & Jervis-Tracey, 2006) allowing them to make more informed choices about their future career and employment options. The results of this study demonstrated the professional benefits that can be achieved when a school district, schools and a university work in partnership to create an innovative program to encourage preservice teachers to consider teaching in a rural and remote area. The preservice teachers that volunteered for the 'Over the Hill' program had varied reasons for participation but were self motivated to attend. All fifteen preservice teachers noted they gained a deeper understanding

of teaching in a rural and remote school, however, other knowledge such as teaching in a multi-grade classroom, forming collegial networks and ways schools can work with parents and community members were also viewed as professionally beneficial by the participants. Indeed, this 'real world' experience not only assisted them to make decisions about teaching in the bush but also assisted in their overall development as teachers.

The Commonwealth Government stated in 2003 that more academics involved in teacher education required recent classroom teaching experience "to maintain the currency of their practical knowledge and to build up greater collegiality between schools and universities" (p. 1). The results of the 'Over the Hill' program concur with this statement as the reflections of the accompanying academics demonstrated the professional benefits that can exist for teacher educators when they re-visit the classroom. Both academics indicated they gained a greater understanding of the preservice teacher experience and felt they would be better equipped to prepare preservice teachers for teaching in rural and remote areas in the future. Both academics also agreed that universities should consider developing programs that create opportunities for academics to revisit classrooms. Working along-side the academics also proved to be beneficial for the school staff that enjoyed participating in professional conversations about current educational trends and practices. Further benefits were noted by the staff commenting that hosting a preservice teacher provided opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own practice with school students experiencing the varied teaching strategies and approaches provided by the visitors.

Innovative programs such as Over the Hill provide real world experiences for preservice teachers that can assist to change perceptions about living and teaching in rural and remote areas (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell & Millwater, 1999). Such programs will hopefully have long-term benefits with preservice teachers making informed choices about their future careers and ultimately easing the staffing shortages in the bush. If careful thought is given to the design and implementation of such programs, professional benefits can be achieved for all involved. Universities need to consider how they are preparing their preservice teachers to teach in rural and remote settings and whether there are opportunities to shape their programs so professional benefits can be promoted for all involved.

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