

Aboriginal Post-Interns' Views Of Their Rural Teaching-Practicum¹

Jessi Gerard, University of Saskatchewan, Canada
Joshua Lapointe, University of Saskatchewan, Canada
Edwin Ralph, University of Saskatchewan, Canada
Keith Walker, University of Saskatchewan, Canada

ABSTRACT

In this article, two indigenous post-interns, who completed their 16-week extended-teaching practicum sessions in rural schools in one Western Canadian province, assess their school-based internship experiences. They summarize their perspectives in three areas: 1) the elements they perceived as positive during the internship, 2) the challenging aspects they encountered during the four-month period, and 3) advice or suggestions for enhancing future practicum programs that they offer to practicum stakeholders. These views of the two-post-interns are compared to the findings from earlier research that similarly examined previous post-interns' evaluations of their rural extended-practicum experiences in that region. Similarities and differences between the two sets of findings are discussed and implications are drawn for enhancing rural-based teaching practicums for neophyte teachers.

Keywords: Aboriginal Teacher Education; Internships; Practicum Programs; Rural Education

INTRODUCTION

The internship experience forms a key component of the pre-service preparation of practitioners across almost all professional disciplines (Domask, 2007; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010). With respect to internships in teacher-education, neophyte teachers learn to teach during an extended-practicum session (in the case of this study, a four-month period from September to December) within actual school environments, under the joint-mentorship of a classroom cooperating-teacher and a university-based facilitator (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). However, because limited research existed regarding Aboriginal¹ teacher-candidates' internships in rural schools (Ralph, 1993), we wanted to help reduce this gap. Thus, in this project², we solicited the views of two recent Aboriginal post-interns regarding their internship experiences - one in a band-controlled rural school and the other in a provincial rural school. We compared their perspectives to the views of previous cohorts of post-interns who had completed their extended practicum in rural schools in a Western Canadian province (Ralph, 2000; Ralph & Walker, 2012a).

Aboriginal teacher education has made significant gains across Canada in recent years (Ibbitson, 2010), but stakeholders believe that more progress is required to establish its full potential (Porter, 2012; Wimmer, Legare, Arcand, & Cottrell, 2010). This progress will be influenced by the achievement of certain goals: 1) a reduction of lingering social problems in some Aboriginal communities, 2) the elimination of racial stereotypes in society (Sanford, Williams, Hopper, & McGregor, 2012), 3) an increase in educational funding for Aboriginal schools (Adam, 2013; Quesnel, 2013), and 4) the stability of Aboriginal leadership and self-governance and cross-cultural collaboration (Hyslop, 201; St. Denis, 2010).

¹“Aboriginal” in Canada refers to one of three indigenous groups: “First Nations”; “Inuit”; or “Metis” (Aboriginal Affairs, 2013; Metis National, 2013).

² Portions of this article were presented in the authors' session, *First Nations' post-interns' views: Interning in rural and band schools* conducted at the 18th National Congress on Rural Education in Canada: Rural Schools Making a Difference, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, March 17-19, 2013.

The purpose of the present project was to gather data provided by two Aboriginal post-interns regarding their rural internship experience - Jessi, a First Nations teacher-candidate, and Josh, a Metis intern. We then compared/contrasted their perspectives with those reported by earlier cohorts of post-interns who previously completed their extended practica through the same university (Ralph, 2003; Ralph & Walker, 2012b).

BACKGROUND

Canada has witnessed increased urbanization, substantial governmental financial cutbacks, economic downturns in various sectors, and the consequent decline of rural populations. Until recently, a rural-urban gap existed in that rural areas, compared to their urban counterparts, had been experiencing declines in employment opportunities, new housing, economic expansion, school enrolment, student achievement, teacher recruitment, and high school course availability (Canadian Council, 2009). These factors, coupled with recent efforts among Canadian teacher-education faculties to provide Aboriginal teacher preparation programs (Canadian Council, 2009; First Nations, 2013), have led increasing numbers of Aboriginal individuals to enter teaching (Kitchen, Cherubini, Trudeau, & Hodson, 2010). Furthermore, the Canadian Federal Government (which funds First Nations education), the provincial governments (which fund non-Aboriginal education), and teacher-preparation institutions are collaborating to coordinate their efforts to enhance Aboriginal education overall (Erickson, 2013; Government of Saskatchewan, 2011; Quesnel, 2013).

As is the case in other Canadian provinces, Saskatchewan offers several Aboriginal teacher education programs (SaskNetWork, 2003), two of which are ITEP (*Indian Teacher Education Program*) and SUNTEP (*Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program*). Affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education, ITEP is a direct-entry program designed for First Nations teacher candidates and SUNTEP is a direct-entry program catering to Metis prospective teachers. Teacher candidates in the final year of these TEP programs are assigned either to Aboriginal (band-controlled) or non-Aboriginal schools, in which they complete their four-month extended-practicum. In both settings, a facilitator from the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education co-ordinates the practicum mentorship process with a group of interns and their classroom co-operating teachers (Lemisko & Ward, 2010; Ralph, 2000; Ralph & Walker, 2012a).

Previous Research

The amount of research regarding rural internships, especially relating to Aboriginal teacher education, is scant. For example, in 1991, Borys et al. reported nine key benefits accruing to rural school divisions, to the faculty of education and to practicum students, as a result of participating in one collaborative school-university partnership that jointly delivered an effective practicum program. Two of these benefits were that student teachers received bursary support and assistance in finding housing in their placement and that the school division capitalized on this collaboratively conducted practicum to recruit new teachers for its schools.

North American research on rural practica is limited (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Ralph, 2000). However, that situation seems to be changing, as shown by subsequent events that have emerged in the field, such as: 1) the call for more widespread research on preparing new teachers for rural teaching, 2) a growing interest across the professional disciplines in the importance of experiential learning and practicum programs (Goodnough, & Mulcahy, 2011; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010) and in the mentoring/coaching process accompanying such programs (Ralph & Walker, 2011; 2012b), 3) the increased attention shown by such groups as the Canadian National Congress on Rural Education, now in its 18th year (National Congress, 2013), and 4) more research into enhancing Aboriginal teacher education in Canada (Hyslop, 2011; Sanford et al., 2012; Wimmer et al., 2010).

In studies of teacher-interns completing their extended-practicum in rural schools in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003) reported that several advantages and disadvantages of rural teaching cited by the interns (including Aboriginal interns) were similar to those expressed by urban interns. Most of the concerns were common to all beginning teachers, regardless of their placement, and these concerns typically reflected novice teachers' levels of concern revealed in previous research on beginning teachers' experiences (Ralph, 2002). The elements that were previously identified as being distinctly "rural" (Ralph, 2000, 2002, 2003; Ralph & Walker, 2012a ; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010) were often related to non-school factors, such as interns

being able to secure suitable living accommodations for the practicum, interns incurring extra expenses for travel to and from the rural location during the practicum, or the lack of access to instructional resources and/or cultural/leisure/entertainment venues compared to the ease of access to these perks in the cities.

Provincial Demographics

The present study was conducted, as were the earlier ones, under the auspices of the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan with which the ITEP and SUNTEP programs are affiliated. Saskatchewan is the sixth largest of Canada's ten provinces in terms of population, having approximately 1.2 million people — approximately 188,000 of whom are students in the Province's K-12 school systems (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011; Saskatchewan Ministry, 2010, 2011). Fifteen percent of the province's total population is Aboriginal, of which 60% is First Nations, 33% is Metis, and 4% is Inuit. Six percent of Saskatchewan's approximately 11,000 teachers are self-declared Aboriginals; while about 11% of the Province's schools is Aboriginal (i.e., band controlled).

Approximately 37% of Saskatchewan's citizens live in rural and remote areas, while the remainder resides in its 16 cities (i.e., urban centers that have a population of 5,000 or more). Fifty-five percent of the K-12 schools in the Province are located in rural/northern areas (e.g., in towns, villages, hamlets, aboriginal/band land, or remote locations), and those rural schools enroll approximately 47% of the province's total student population. The cities, which contain approximately 46% of the province's schools, hold nearly 53% of the total student enrollment (Saskatchewan Ministry, 2010, 2011).

Each year, the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan places approximately 350 teacher-interns in provincial and band-controlled schools during their final year of their teacher education program. Interns are placed in urban and rural/remote schools, including those that are band-controlled, in the approximate 50:50 ratio, urban to rural. Approximately 20% of the total number of interns placed by the University is Aboriginal, 14% of which come from ITEP and 6% from SUNTEP.

METHOD

Subjects

Jessi and Josh, two Aboriginal post-interns who shared their views of their rural internship experiences for this project, were representative of the two Aboriginal sub-groups who completed their extended-practicum in 2012. They answered the same three questions that earlier post-intern cohorts had been asked: 1) What were the positive aspects you experienced in the rural internship?, 2) What were the challenging aspects?, and 3) What message/advice would you offer stakeholders regarding future rural practica? (Ralph, 2000, 2002, 2003; Ralph & Walker, 2012b) Jesse completed his practicum in a K-8 band-controlled school, while Josh was placed in a rural K-12 provincial school.

The demographics for the eight previous cohorts of rural post-interns were a total of 111 interns, 89 of whom were female and of whom approximately 17% were ITEP or SUNTEP students. The 111 interns were placed in 57 rural/band-controlled schools in 38 rural communities and they were representative of the College of Education's overall student population in terms of sex ratio, range of grade levels and subjects taught, mix of interns' major and minor teaching specializations, and range of school size.

Procedure

At the completion of each of the practicum sessions, we invited post-interns to complete an optional written survey of the three open-ended questions mentioned above. Confidentiality was preserved because post-interns were asked to place no identifying demographic information on the surveys.

We collated and analyzed the responses using the "constant comparative" technique (Mills, 2010) in which an inductive analysis of the data was conducted (Best & Kahn, 2006). Using this approach, we engaged in a process

of systematically categorizing and re-categorizing the responses according to emerging patterns or themes from the data. These evolving categories gradually formed a framework for communicating the essence of how the interns perceived their practicum experiences (see, for example, McMillan & Schumacher, 2009).

We cross-analyzed the responses provided by the two Aboriginal post-interns' with the data previously reported and we summarize our findings below. We desire that these results may not only help inform the stakeholders directly involved in the practica program at our university, but that they may also assist interested program administrators and researchers from other jurisdictions seeking to enhance their respective practicum efforts, especially regarding the preparation of Aboriginal teachers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We synthesize the findings using the categories that emerged from the three research questions related to the positive, challenging, and advice elements of the responses.

Positive Aspects of Interning in Rural Schools

The positive features of rural internships that Jessi and Josh identified were generally similar to those reported by cohorts of post-interns in the previous research (Ralph, 2002, 2003; Ralph & Walker, 2012b; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010), but both of them also indicated some differences connected to Aboriginal matters, which had not been described in the previous research. The positive aspects that were common to the Aboriginal post-interns and the earlier cohorts were:

- Having a closer acquaintance with the students, school staff, parents, and community
- Having the support and encouragement of the whole school staff
- Having small class size made instruction relatively less stressful
- Having opportunities to engage in a wide variety of experiences and events, both school- and community-based
- Living in a more relaxed rural environment

Josh, who had been an urban dweller all his life stated that he grew to appreciate the opportunity to live in a small town on his own and to "...be nice and close to the school and to be able to walk to and from my place...". Regarding the broad range of extra-curricular activities available to him, he emphasized his involvement in "the multi-day, fall Grade 10 canoe trip, the senior boys' volleyball, tournament travel and chaperoning, and the inter-school soccer coaching trips" as some of his most pleasantly memorable internship activities.

Regarding the newly appearing factors related to the Aboriginal theme, Jessi mentioned that in the band-controlled school, he experienced "much cultural rejuvenation integrating the First Nations perspective into the learning experience of my Grade 7 and 8 students." He elaborated that, overall, the young people in the early to middle adolescent age-group he taught were "eager to learn and were full of energy", and he said that they seemed to enjoy the Aboriginal connections he was able to make with and for them within some of the school subjects.

In addition, Josh indicated that his SUNTEP training at university had prepared him well for internship in that it "taught us to be sensitive about Metis and First Nations history and to incorporate that knowledge within our classrooms." Josh praised the quality of SUNTEP commenting that it was "...an awesome direct-entry program, with smaller classes, different cultural activities, its own building on campus, and its provision of any academic advice or help that was always there if needed." Indeed, Edwin noted in his mentorship of Jessi and Josh that both of them skillfully infused Aboriginal perspectives into their teaching practice.

Challenges of Interning in Rural Schools

As was the case regarding the positive aspects of rural internship, several of the disadvantages identified by Jessi and Josh also coincided with those reported by previous post-interns (Ralph, 2000; Ralph & Walker, 2012a; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010). These common challenges were:

- *Isolation from support groups:* For instance, Josh’s statement “I found it lonely sometimes because of being away from family and friends and not being able to work at my job on weekends to earn extra money” reflected similar views of interns from the earlier cohorts. Jessi, on the other hand, had a relatively short drive between the band school where he interned and his home in a neighboring First Nation community.
- *Lack of services/professional resources:* Josh’s view of “not having facilities, like a good grocery store or a ‘Tim’s’ [a well-known Canadian coffee-shop franchise] in the town and not having ready and instant access to I-phone and internet services at my residence, were all frustrating for me” mirrored similar responses from past interns regarding negative aspects of teaching in rural areas. Jessi, by contrast, stated that he felt he had been well served, both at school and home, with adequate IT access.
- *Extra expenses:* As reported by previous post-intern cohorts, Jessi and Josh expressed concern at the additional expenses incurred during the internship. For Jessi, it was the daily one-hour (return) commute between his home and the neighboring band, and for Josh, it was the extra costs of renting accommodations in the town, of buying higher-priced groceries (e.g., he had to pay \$11.00 for a container of chocolate milk at the town store), and of paying for a monthly six-hour (return) commute between his city residence and his rural placement.

With respect to negative aspects that were not identified in the earlier rural internship research, Jessi mentioned certain challenges that he observed during his four-month internship in the band school. He found four issues to be problematic, which ultimately hindered student learning in his Grade 7 and 8 homeroom: 1) chronic student attendance and tardiness problems, 2) unruly behavior and uncooperative attitudes among some students, 3) student disinterest in some of the prescribed curricula, and 4) home and community situations that affected student conduct at school, such as substance abuse and/or community/political conflicts.

Advice for Practicum Stakeholders

As was the case in the above two categories, the advice given by the Aboriginal post-interns was similar to that provided by the previous cohorts, but with some differences. For instance, Jessi and Josh agreed with the earlier respondents who urged future interns to get immediately involved in as much school and community life as possible, “...without ignoring your internship preparation and teaching responsibilities.” They especially encouraged new interns to participate in coaching teams and in helping organize and/or conduct extra-curricular activities, but again “without spreading yourselves too thin, because getting involved increases your credibility when the students see you active and interested.”

Even though Jessi experienced some trying circumstances with student behavior during the practicum, he advised prospective interns, as did respondents in the previous studies (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010) to “Get busy. Try everything. Make a name for yourself. Smile lots. Talk to everyone. Always be positive, but also be assertive when required!” In like manner, Josh urged upcoming interns: “Don’t be shy. Get out there and pitch in. I got to help the volleyball coaches travelling with the kids and helped chaperone them at tournaments in other towns, staying overnight on the gym floor.”

With respect to giving advice specifically to Aboriginal interns placed either in band-controlled or provincial schools, Jessi and Josh encouraged them to “be confident in your heritage and not be backward in promoting the teaching and learning of our lost culture. We all need to do what we can to reduce the stereotypes against ‘Indian/Native’ culture.”

Jessi and Josh also suggested to rural school districts, as did the earlier post-interns (Ralph, 2000), that all rural school districts and band schools should provide interns with monthly stipends to help them defray their internship expenses. Another suggestion offered by Josh to all practicum stakeholders was to have each school and community prepare some type of “commercial or ad” highlighting its positive features to attract future interns. For instance, by means of distributing a print or electronic document to interns before placements are finalized, rural schools could summarize the benefits and advantages of interning in their respective communities. Such an effort would benefit all parties - interns, the schools, and the university.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this article, we confirmed that rural placements for the extended-practicum are generally viewed in a positive light by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal post-interns alike. We draw implications from our findings for future interns, teacher education programmers, and school districts and band-school leaders. First, educational leaders need to continue to collaborate to maintain the positive aspects of rural internships. Sustaining these advantages will help attract prospective teachers to rural districts. Furthermore, teacher education institutions and rural school districts/band schools may need to explore ways to provide additional support, such as subsidizing the rural internship, by providing all interns with a monthly bursary to help defray their expenses.

Also, stakeholders will need to continue to cooperate at reducing or eliminating the perceived drawbacks identified by post-interns. For example, to deal with the concern of interns feeling isolated, all school personnel could be encouraged to welcome interns by offering personal and professional support and encouragement, particularly during the first few weeks of the practicum. Furthermore, a deliberate effort by stakeholders to collaborate in alerting interns ahead of time to the advantages of doing their internships in particular communities would benefit all parties involved (Borys et al., 1991; Ralph, 2003).

A caveat of this study, common to all qualitative research, is the lack of generalizability to other situations (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). The views of the two Aboriginal post-interns in this study may indeed be limited. However, a more tenable approach would be to assert that the so-called generalization difficulty could be re-framed in terms of *transferability* (Donmoyer, 1990). Transferability means that program organizers in similar settings would freely examine the findings presented here in order to gain possible insights to help them inform and/or re-interpret the functioning of their own programs (Best & Kahn, 2006).

In conclusion, we are hopeful that all post-interns, at the conclusion of their respective rural extended-practicum programs whether in Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal settings, could endorse what Josh, the SUNTEP post-intern in this study, concluded:

Just let all interns know how positive it actually is in a small town school. I was at first incredibly worried about going to a rural setting. It wasn't supposed to happen, but it proved to be a completely different experience. I would never have known what it was like in small schools and areas like this. It was the best experience and I had a ton of fun. My internship was amazing!

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Jessi Gerard, B.Ed., is a recent graduate of ITEP in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada. He completed his internship in 2012 at a band-controlled school.

Joshua Lapointe, B.Ed., is a recent graduate of SUNTEP through the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, Canada. He completed his internship in 2012 at a rural provincial school.

Edwin Ralph, Ph.D., is a professor and internship facilitator with the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. He facilitated the extended practicum for Jessi and Joshua. E-mail: edwin.ralph@usask.ca (Corresponding author)

Keith Walker, Ph.D., is a professor with the College of Education and the Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon.

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