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Preparing teachers to teach in rural schools: An Australian perspective

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Background

Since the 1980's there have been a number of Australian federal and state government initiated reports and reviews focussing on the preparation of primary (K-6) and secondary (7-12) teachers for rural appointments. In New South Wales, the Department of Education and Training is the major provider of education in rural places with approximately 55% of its 2,200 schools located in provincial rural and remote rural locations. Staffing rural schools has been a continuing problematic for education employer authorities (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 2000; Scott 1990).

An earlier literature review (Boylan, 2004) concluded that four successful strategies for rural teacher recruitment included:

1. *Rural scholarship programmes*

One effective recruitment strategy was the offering of teacher education scholarships to prospective students from rural background / places. The literature review confirmed that this strategy has been shown to produce long-term benefits for systemic education employers in staffing rural and remote schools.

2. *Tertiary rural education subjects*

The review clearly identified the need to provide specific subjects that study the conditions of living and teaching in rural places as an essential component of all pre-service teacher education programmes.

3. *Rural teaching experiences*

Closely allied to the tertiary institution based subjects addressing rural education is the absolutely essential requirement that students engage in a rural practice teaching experience.

4. *Adjustment, transition and induction*

The final outcome focused on the degree and nature of support provided by the systemic teacher employer organisations during the first year of appointment. The provision of induction and mentor programmes was demonstrated as effective strategies that addressed not only the organisational and professional issues of rural teaching but also the social and personal adjustment issues that beginning rural teachers experience.

Collectively, these strategies are designed to improve recruitment of teachers for rural appointments and provided the theoretical foundation within which the focus of this paper is situated. In particular, the paper uses the concept of a rural lens (Wallace & Boylan, 2007) to focus on the second and third successful strategies and to elucidate the elements within each of these two strategies to enhance rural pre-service teacher education programmes.

Research Questions

The *first* focus for this paper examines the literature on the needs of and the preparation of prospective teacher education students for rural teaching appointment as essential features in their

pre-service teacher education course. Collectively these inquiries have indicated that the preparation of teachers for rural school appointments requires specific attention being devoted to the exploration of a range of social, cultural, geographical, historical, political, and service access issues that define the difference in working and living in rural contexts compared to other locations.

The *second* focus generated a synthesis from the set of policy and practice recommendations contained within the cited literature of essential attributes for rural teacher preparation. This literature synthesis process led to the generation of a detailed set of specific inclusions that were deemed fundamental inclusions and critical features within a pre-service teacher education course.

The *third* focus sought to validate the set of inclusions through an iterative process in which the opinions and views of teacher educators, experienced rural teachers and pre-service teacher education students were sought. This process culminated in a refinement of the initial set of essential inclusions in a rural pre-service course. The outcome from this validation process revealed strong support for the initial set of inclusions. Additionally, similarities and differences between the groups emerged which will be explored during this presentation.

The *fourth* focus examined the institutional course offerings of all 11 New South Wales universities providing pre-service primary and secondary teacher education courses to identify which teacher education institutions were offering subjects and experiences in rural education within each institution. This analysis aligns with the second and third strategies identified in the literature review (Boylan, 2004).

The *final* focus for this presentation will seek comparative comments and feedback on the programme elements and inclusions raised in this paper and on the state on rural pre-service teacher education in the United Kingdom.

Methods

A multi-faceted approach to examining the focuses of this research into rural pre-service education was adopted. The approach included: a) analysing Australian national and state-level policy documents about rural education; b) developing a set of detailed inclusions in a rural pre-service teacher education course; c) scrutinising the eleven NSW university pre-service teacher education course documentation; and, d) field validating the literature-based subject inclusions through surveying three groups: i) rural tertiary teacher educators; ii) rural deputy principals and principals; and, iii) final year teacher education students from a rural university in New South Wales. Each group provided written responses to the same two questions: Q1. What should be included as **essentials** in a pre-service course to prepare students for rural schools? and Q2. What should be included as **desirables** in a pre-service course to prepare students for rural schools? 9 rural tertiary educators, 12 rural school administrators, and 60 final year students participated. Their responses were analysed and classified using the literature based subject inclusion categories that are described in the Research Findings section of this abstract/paper.

Document analyses

Six Australian national and NSW state-level reports addressing aspects of rural pre-service teacher education were examined. They were:

- Schooling in rural Australia report (CSC, 1988);
- National inquiry into rural and remote education (HREOC, 2000);
- Towards a national education and training strategy for rural Australia, (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1991);
- Listening and responding. A review of education in rural New South Wales (Rawlinson, 1983);
- Quality Matters: Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices (Ramsey, 2000); and,

- Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in New South Wales. (Vinson, 2002(a), 2002(b), 2002(c)).

University courses

A profile of the rural focus contained within the respective primary and secondary pre-service teacher education courses for each Faculty of Education within New South Wales was developed through close examination of their public course documentation available in their respective university handbooks.

Specifically, this profile sought to gather information about the following three questions that were based on the analysis of the literature:

1. Did the programme include any specific subject or subject(s) on or about rural education?
2. If a programme included a rural education subject or subjects, what was the status of the subject(s) within the program structure: Compulsory or optional?
3. Did the programme include a rural practice teaching experience as a compulsory or optional component of the program?

Frame

A critical analysis of the literature that focussed on the second and third strategies (*Tertiary rural education subjects*, and *Rural teaching experiences*) identified in the Introduction section of this abstract/paper was conducted. This process sought to identify the recurrent elements within each strategy identified through the literature that were cited as important inclusions for a rural pre-service teacher education course. Part of this process involved the grounded theoretical development of common and emergent elements within each of the strategies. Further, the interconnectedness of the two strategies emerged as a central and important outcome which emphasised the integrated nature required in an effective programme aimed at preparing teachers for rural appointments. This critical literature analysis examined each strategy in significantly more depth than the Barley (2009) study which was loosely based on the Barker and Beckner (1985) survey of 473 US based tertiary institutions.

The analysis of all eleven NSW universities providing pre-service teacher education courses involved analysis of the course structures, the subjects within each course and the practice teaching requirements specified through the public web based documentation for each institution.

The final component of this paper used the information generated from the critical analysis of the literature to field validate the elements identified. Additionally, this process sought further confirmation on the completeness of the elements listed, and the level of importance of each element within a pre-service programme. The data were coded and analysed using SPSS.

Research findings

One significant major research finding emerged from the literature analysis. This outcome provided for the first time a significantly well developed set of six programme elements coupled with specific content and experiential matters within each element required in a pre-service teacher education program. These elements are:

Element 1. Teaching and learning focussed

This element includes exploration, examination, developing understandings of, and engaging in classroom place-based practice.

Element 2. Administration focussed

Pre-service students need to become familiar with a range of school related administrative responsibilities and be able to effectively carry out these roles.

Element 3 Community focussed

For the beginning teacher, a rural appointment often means it will be the first time they are required to live and work in a community, something that can be a difficult aspect of their adjustment to rural teaching.

Element 4 Personal focussed

As part of the pre-service teacher education program, students need to appreciate and reflect upon their personal lifestyle, recreational and socialising forces and analyse their suitability for a rural appointment.

Element 5 Field experience focussed

This element of a rural pre-service teacher education program focuses on the provision of a diverse set of practical experiences typically developed through field based experiences in rural, regional, remote and/or isolated places.

Element 6 Professional learning focussed

The final element of a rural teacher education program creates the link between the pre-service and the in-service education of rural teachers.

In the presentation, each of the 6 elements will be fully developed and audience feedback invited.

The second major outcome addresses the state of rural education provision in pre-service teacher education programmes in all 11 NSW tertiary institutions. The results of this document analysis revealed:

1. Only one institution had a compulsory rural education subject;
2. Two institutions offered an optional subject in rural education; and,
3. Rural practice teaching was optional in all institutions.

Finally, the results from the field validation process provided strong confirmation and support for the six elements generated from the literature. Within each element collectively the tertiary rural education lecturers, rural administrator and pre-service teacher education students both supported the list of sub-element inclusions generated and added additional inclusions. As part of this presentation, the audience will be invited to respond to the six elements and the various sub-element inclusions as well as provide comparative commentary on the usefulness of the elements for a UK context.