

“LET ME HAVE MY OWN PIGEON HOLE AND COPYING NUMBER”: DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS IN RURAL AND REMOTE SCHOOLS.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, four questions of concern to Education Departments and teacher education institutions in Australia are addressed.

How do we develop strategies to attract beginning teachers to rural, remote and isolated schools and how do we retain teachers in those schools?

What professional development is available that values rural life? What are some of the current pre-service initiatives that prepare teachers entering rural areas.?

How do we meet the professional development needs of teachers and pre-service teachers in rural, remote and isolated areas?

This paper will draw on research from a collaborative, ARC funded study Teacher/intern Partnerships in Isolated areas. Partners in the study include, Queensland University of Technology, Education Queensland, the Priority Country Area Program, the Queensland Teachers Union and the Board of Teacher Registration. The project is designed to better prepare inexperienced teachers for the particular demands involved in teaching in rural and isolated areas. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in remote and isolated areas.

The paper will focus on issues related to developing partnerships between stakeholders which facilitate reflective and interactive teaching practices. A mentor/internship model that promotes in student-interns an understanding of the needs of students and parents in their school and community will be outlined.

RELATIONSHIP TO CONFERENCE THEME

Beginning teachers' experience of rural and remote communities fundamentally affects how school students' perceive and construct new meanings, new understandings and participate in "New Times". This paper researches how new teachers are prepared to interact in these communities.

Undertaking a study into the efficacy of teacher preparation for teaching in rural and remote area schools necessarily involves re-thinking the roles of more than just teacher education institutions.

Establishing partnerships with other institutions and bodies concerned with education in rural and remote areas is essential if many of the complex issues associated with the preparation, and consequently the attraction and retention of beginning teachers to these areas is to be addressed.

One such project which begins to tackle these issues is Teacher/intern partnerships in isolated areas. This project is a collaborative, ARC funded project which aims to improve the preparation of pre-service teachers for teaching in rural and remote schools. Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has joined with Education Queensland, Priority Country Area Program (PCAP), the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU) and the Board of Teacher Registration (BTR) to trial an internship program for 4th year Bachelor of Education students in isolated schools in Queensland.

THE CONTEXT

A significant question for each of these partners is, what should be the nature of preservice and inservice professional development for teachers in rural and remote teaching positions? Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell and Millwater (in progress) argue that many pre-service programs have only recently begun to address what has been an historically enduring and well documented concern, that is, the lack of effective preparation of teachers to teach in rural schools (Gardener and Edington, 1982; Helge, 1982; Barker and Beckner, 1987;

Boomer, 1988; Lunn, 1997). Gibson (1994) points out that despite a large body of research that found the need for specialized pre-service preparation which accommodates the social and professional differences associated with work in these contexts (Turney, Sinclair and Cairns, 1980; Darnell, 1981; Sher, 1981; National Board of Employment, Educations and Training 1991), the implementation of such programs by teacher education institutions has been sparse, lacking in cohesion and in many cases non-existent.

Gibson (1994:1) concludes:

Following an hiatus of more than a decade when both government and public attention was rarely focused upon the needs of rural communities in a formal and structured way, a flurry of recent state and national reports have attempted to redress this neglect. Despite this new policy level activity, however, it would appear that a recent analysis of training, staffing and selection practices across the country would indicate that little of this policy level concern has been translated into effective practice. In addition, data gathered from teachers newly appointed to rural communities raise concerns about a lack of preparedness for work in these areas.

While Gibson's concerns highlight a problem within many pre-service and inservice programs, a number of other courses, programs and projects have begun to foreground this area of concern and in many cases have been highly successful in attracting beginning teachers to rural schools (Spuhler, 1989; Perry and Rog, 1989; Borys, Wilgosh, Lefebvre, Kisilevich, Samiroden, Olson and Ware, 1991; Murphy and Cross, 1991;

Vance and Sullivan, 1993; Boylan, Squires and Smith, 1994; Meiklejohn and Barrett, 1994; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell and Millwater, in progress). The hope is that these experiences, in conjunction with policy level initiatives and concerns (Gibson 1994) may provide a framework within which beginning teacher education can successfully address the problem of teachers and teaching in isolated schools.

Much of the research above suggests that there is a need to examine what are the perceived needs of teachers (in particular beginning teachers) and student teachers in relation to issues surrounding teaching in rural and remote area schools. Such information is essential in addressing Lunn's (1997: 157) recommendation that pre-service training institutions: devise and include courses that will better prepare prospective teachers for teaching and living in rural and remote communities in generalist training.

In response to these, and other, issues a large research and consultative team has been established to draw on the expertise and resources of the institutions involved. The QUT research team is made up of a number of experienced researchers and practitioners. They are Dr Alan Yarrow (team leader), Professor Brian Hansford, Associate Professor Roy Ballantyne, Jan Millwater and Paul Herschell. In addition, Leslie McFarlane from the QUT, Carmen Smith from the BTR, Leonne Shaw from Education Queensland and Margaret Le Maistre from PCAP will represent their respective organisations on the project. Major funding comes from the Australian Research Council (ARC), however, each of the partners have contributed both cash and in-kind support for the project. The total funding for the three years totals \$240 000.

The project will trial the use of a mentor/intern model of professional development in rural and remote areas of Queensland. Students and teachers will work together over a six week period and share a normal teaching work load. Experienced teachers will be given the opportunity to work closely with student teachers nearing the end of the pre-service program, while the student teachers will gain from the experience of teachers familiar with special needs of schools in these communities.

By providing pre-service teachers with experience of the needs of the rural community the project hopes to better prepare beginning teachers for teaching situations in isolated areas. A major focus of this project is in developing partnerships between teachers, student teachers and the rural community. Participants will be encouraged to actively engage in interactions designed to facilitate reflective and interactive teaching practices. The process will involve teacher-mentors and student-interns working together to develop and improve relationships with students and the wider community. The internship model used will make it essential that the student-interns develop an understanding of the needs of students and parents in their school and community. It is also hoped that geographically isolated students will benefit from the long term effects of improved teacher preparation.

In the first year of this three year project there will be seventeen, fourth year participants from the primary and secondary strands of the Bachelor of Education. They will travel to various South Western region schools and spend six weeks working with a teacher-mentor. This first trial rural internship is due to take place in the last six weeks of Term 4, 1997. In the second and third year of the project students will travel to different areas in Queensland, including Cape York and Torres Strait Island communities. We recognize that the nature of teaching in isolated areas varies according to region and cultural differences and therefore each year of the project will focus on a different and culturally distinct region. Experiences gained from each year will inform the structure and organization of the following year and refinements will be incorporated into the program.

THE PARTNERSHIP

Each industry partner has a significant individual as well as collaborative, interest in the processes and outcomes of the project. The project aims to utilize the skills and expertise of the industry partners to investigate quality of pre-service preparation and the nature of in-service support through a joint preservice and inservice professional development strategy. Accordingly, the partnership has been established to examine the access, equity and participation factors that may hinder the recruitment of new teachers and the retention of experienced teachers in remote areas.

QUT

Queensland University of Technology is primarily concerned with incorporating the significant findings of the project into its preservice program. A priority is to ensure that graduating teachers have been effectively prepared for a range of possible early postings, including remote south-western, north-western and peninsular area schools.

At the heart of QUITO's strategy is the trial of the use of a mentor/intern model of professional development where students and teachers work together over a six week period and share a normal teaching work load in an isolated school. Experienced teachers will be given the opportunity to work closely with student teachers nearing the end of their pre-service program, while the student teachers will gain from the experience of teachers familiar with special needs of schools in these communities. This project extends the work carried out in an internship program trialed in several, Brisbane Schools between 1994 and 1996.

The Board of Teacher Registration

Similarly, the Board of Teacher Registration has a long standing interest in the area. The board's report Learning to Teach highlighted the need for forging new partnerships in teacher education. The 'Summit' meeting hosted by the board in 1995 represented the first step in an attempt to facilitate a shared understanding of current partnerships, a shared commitment to future partnerships, and action plans to realize them.

The board has been prominent in initiating the development and implementation of trial internships with QUT over the past three years. The results of these trials have shown that students and teachers develop skills and experience in reflective practice and collegial support activities. Student participants in the internship program will be better prepared for service in isolated areas, both in terms of their professional skills as teachers and their professional experience of rural culture.

The Queensland Teachers Union

The Queensland Teachers Union has also been involved in consultation and negotiation with the Board of Teacher Registration and QUT about the roles and positions of student teachers undertaking internships. Formal agreement has been reached which will see student teachers registered as associate teachers for the duration of the internship. Teachers acting as mentors will be given the opportunity to undertake other professional development in conjunction with the role as teacher/mentors.

The QTU is particularly concerned with the practical problems facing geographically isolated teachers.

Firstly, intern partnerships will be explored and developed as a mutually beneficial technique for improving the professional skills of practicing and pre-service teachers. This technique will be applied to the solution of professional development problems experienced by geographically isolated teachers.

Secondly, student teachers who participate in the program will be well prepared for service in isolated areas. Two way communication will be established to bridge the gap between teacher education and teaching in remote areas. This will involve heightening the awareness of industry partners regarding the practical issues faced by isolated teachers as well as infusing current education theory and innovative techniques into the classroom.

Thirdly, the quality of education for geographically isolated school students will be enhanced through the provision of relevant and effective professional development for teachers, resulting in improved recruitment and retention rates in isolated areas.

The QUT's commitment to the delivery of quality public education across Queensland clearly includes support for teachers in isolated and rural areas. With many beginning teachers expecting to be placed in these schools early in their career, it is hoped that the support the students receive from the partners while they participate in this project, will encourage teaching in rural and isolated areas to become a preferred option.

The Priority Area Country Program

The Priority Area Country Program's (PCAP) primary area of concern lies in removing barriers to students from geographically isolated areas and allowing them to participate fully in quality education. It aims to stimulate and facilitate the development, at the local level, of proposals for funding, designed to address the needs of students learning in geographically isolated areas. It encourages schools and communities to develop different and better ways of delivering educational services.

PCAP emphasizes the sharing of ideas, local knowledge, planning, personnel, skills, resources, facilities and activities with and between the school and community. Its experience in encouraging community participation in decision making and planning and implementation of projects gives the project much support in identifying community issues.

Education Queensland

Finally, Education Queensland is fully supportive of the thrust of the project. It agrees that the underlying notion of this project of partnerships within internships has been shown to be beneficial for both preservice and inservice teachers. Although experience indicates that potential teachers who have had the opportunity to undertake practice in areas remote from the metropolitan area are more likely to seek and take up a teaching position there, little detailed information exists in relation to how internships should run in isolated regions. Internship trials in metropolitan areas have also revealed that the professional development of inservice teachers is greatly enhanced.

CONCLUSION

This unique collaboration between industry partners aims to address areas of significant concern to teachers, students and community members in isolated areas. To achieve this, five focus areas have been identified which will act as guiding questions for the Project. They address the need for effective professional development and support for teachers and students teachers living and working in isolated areas.

They are:

The preparation of teachers for their beginning teacher experiences - how do we provide students with 'real' teaching experiences?

Preparation for teaching in rural and remote area schools - how do we better prepare teachers for their early teaching postings in rural and remote schools?

Support for Student teachers and teachers undertaking an internship in an isolated school - how do we effectively explicate the expected roles in the internship and provide support for participants

The relationship between the student teacher and the teacher - how do we improve these relationships?

The development of partnerships - how do we effectively develop

partnerships between institutions, teachers, students and the community

Data collected and analysed will provide us with information specifically related to the five foci outlined in the previous section and help us towards the major outcomes of the project outlined below:

Student teachers will be given the status of associate teachers by professional bodies and thus provide opportunities for student teachers to be treated like 'real teachers' and enhance their position in the school and the community

That a reciprocal mentor/intern relationship, acknowledging different expertise, allows students and teachers to discuss and negotiate their roles

That preservice and inservice professional development occurs together as part of the same process and that this process provides support for both students teachers and practicing teachers in an internship

That combined inservice and preservice professional development that values rural life better prepares teachers entering rural areas and provides support for teachers already teaching there.

That a clear explication of the rationale, structure and processes of the internship to all of the participants facilitates the smooth running of the internship and allows any problems to be quickly resolved.

The project team believes that working towards these outcomes will provide a framework to facilitate the establishment and development of partnerships between teachers, student teachers and the community. These partnerships, along with the macro-partnerships of the industry partners, lie at the heart of the project's overall aim to better prepare students for teaching in rural and remote areas.

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