

Submission to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review 2021

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Title of submission: Understanding university pre-service teacher motivations and barriers to teaching in rural schools.

Objectives

Recent research concerning the staffing of rural schools in Australia presents a consistent picture with many rural schools having trouble in recruiting and retaining staff, especially at secondary school level (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, Halsey 2009, Kline et al. 2013, Preston 2005, Somerville et al. 2010, Trinidad et al. 2014). The last Australian federal government review on rural education also revealed that staffing schools continues to be a challenge (Halsey, 2018). This submission addresses the rural staffing shortage by exploring the motivations and barriers faced by pre-service teachers in an Australian urban university as they explore the prospect of teaching in a rural school. The submission¹ tests two hypotheses prevalent in the literature on rural school staffing. Firstly, that introducing pre-service teachers to rural placement experiences enhances their desire to seek teaching positions in a rural school (Halsey 2009, Sharplin 2009). Secondly, that pre-service teachers from regional or rural backgrounds are more likely to seek a teaching job in rural settings than their urban counterparts (Lyons 2009, Somerville et al. 2010). For the purpose of testing these hypotheses, eight pre-service teachers completing their initial-teacher education were interviewed three times each (before, during and after their rural placement experience) over a period of 16 months.

Research background

¹ Extended versions of this submission can be read here: Cuervo, H., & Acquaro, D. (2018). Exploring metropolitan university pre-service teacher motivations and barriers to teaching in rural schools. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(4), 384-398. doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2018.1438586
And here: Cuervo, H. (2020). A social justice approach to rural school staffing: The need for a politics of distribution and recognition to solve a perennial problem. *Journal of Pedagogy*, 11 (1), pp.127-146. <https://doi.org/10.2478/jped-2020-0007>.

It has been extensively asserted that the difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff has a direct impact on the quality of rural students' educational experiences and outcomes; on the continuity and success of school policies and curriculum implementation; and on the development of a supportive professional community (Commonwealth of Australia 2013, Sharplin 2002, Trinidad et al. 2014). A lack of incentives associated with poor employment conditions (e.g. work overload, additional responsibilities, poor pay), compounded by issues of personal and professional isolation make rural schools problematic to staff. While teacher shortages are not evenly spread across and within states, "they affect most severely those schools that are generally hard-to-staff" (Preston 2005, p. 2) and are commonly in rural areas. These schools become 'unattractive' to teachers, facing unequal competition by better resourced metropolitan and private schools (Trinidad et al. 2014).

Employment uncertainty also plays a significant role. Somerville and colleagues (2010, p. 53) argue that for new teachers in the Australian state of Victoria, where this research took place, the common form of employment is a one year contract. They found that teachers who remained in the school for less than three years mentioned 'contract employment' as the main reason for this decision (see also Pietsch & Williamson 2010, Productivity Commission 2012). Furthermore, teacher graduates are more likely to start their careers on short fixed term or casual contracts, which carry less benefits and entitlements, including lack of access to professional development and mentoring which is crucial for them so early in their careers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

Against these challenges, some studies have suggested two important factors to redress this issue. Firstly, that any success in recruiting and retaining staff in rural schools begins with their

initial teacher preparation (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988, HREOC 2000, White et al. 2011). Thus, as per my first hypothesis, researchers have affirmed that initial-teacher education teaching placements in rural schools play a critical role in influencing pre-service teachers' decisions to continue in the profession and to take up a rural post (Kline et al. 2013, Trinidad et al. 2014). An Australian national study has found that more than 60% of pre-service teachers who undertake a rural teaching placement have 'reinforced' or 'confirmed' through the experience the decision to take a rural appointment (Halsey 2009). Furthermore, my second hypothesis, based on previous research, states that recent graduate teachers from rural places were more likely to choose to work in rural schools (Lyons 2009, Sommerville et al. 2010). Thus, contrary to the idea that government incentives (e.g. rent subsidies, travel allowances) are a major factor to entice new recruits into rural schools, it is in fact teachers' familiarity and knowledge of rural settings that motivates them to stay in a rural town or to leave the city to take up jobs in non-metropolitan schools.

Methods and data sources

Participants for this research project were recruited from a Teacher Education program at a Melbourne-based university. The recruitment of participants was carried out through a general email to the 28 pre-service teachers in the teacher education program who had volunteered to participate in a rural placement program as part of their degree. Ethics approval was obtained through the Human Ethics Committee at the university.

Of the 28 students contacted, eight students, six females and two males, replied positively to take part in the project. Their age ranged from 23 to 30 years, all studying to gain a qualification to teach in secondary schools with areas of specialization ranging from music,

geography to business and social sciences. One participant was originally from a rural area, another was currently living with her partner in a rural town and the other six participants were from the metropolitan city of Melbourne. The sample size is particularly small due to the nature of the research being undertaken and because of the inherent low numbers of students who volunteer to do rural placements. As this is an exploratory study, it does not intend to make any broad generalizations about the reasons and obstacles to take a teaching appointment in a rural school. The research, however, aims to highlight a range of motivations, commitment and barriers faced by pre-service teachers who show interest in working in a school in a rural community.

Each participant was asked to participate in three semi-structured interviews: before, during and after their five week rural placement. Examining the different stages of placements provided a better understanding of change and continuity in pre-service motivations and challenges to work in rural schools. Each set of interviews were conducted over the phone, audio-tape recorded and professionally transcribed. The qualitative data was entered in the NVivo program.

Results

From the first round of interviews (pre-placement) it became clear that the two participants with a 'rural' background (i.e. currently living in and originally from a rural town) were the most committed to working in a rural school. As one of these two participants described: "I got exposed to the country lifestyle when I was visiting him (her boyfriend). I just came to sort of really love it... and if I can teach as well at a rural school that would be amazing." The other 'rural' participant originally from a rural town, commented that she was willing to seek a rural

post but not in her hometown: “I want to live in a small rural community, that’s where I feel comfortable, but not where I grew up”. For both participants the idea of living in a close-knit community and enjoying the outdoors lifestyle was the key motivator to gain employment in a rural school.

Furthermore, all participants praised the quality of life in a small community in their five week placement experience. The common thread was the notion of caring and reciprocity amongst people within these communities. Indeed, in comparing their urban and rural placements (they all completed an urban placement prior to their rural one), the latter was rated more positively due to a “welcoming community”, the “small size classes”, and the familiarity that developed with their students: “you know the students, and their families”. This ‘personal’ quality of rural teaching was highly valued amongst participants.

Despite this positive outlook on rural teaching, all participants before and after their placements held a ‘deficit’ view about rural schooling. Compared to urban schools, rural schools were described as poorly resourced and poorly staffed with many schools having to ‘make do’ with teachers on staff teaching in areas outside their expertise. Participants also suggested that these deficit discourses were constructed through discussions within university subjects, where it was suggested that there is “less academic pressure” in rural schools, greater “classroom management concerns” and an accepted view that rural schools are “disadvantaged”. Studies have asserted that this deficit view hinders the prospect of staff recruitment for rural schools discouraging prospective teachers from considering rural schools (Halsey 2009, Sommerville et al. 2010, White et al. 2011). This study also found that in the pre and post-placement interviews, this deficit view did not change significantly, with

six out of eight participants stating that they found that rural teachers hold lower expectations for their students than what they experienced in their urban placements.

Interviews revealed that the six students with no connection to rural Victoria never seriously considered applying for a rural teaching position and were simply motivated by the opportunity “to do something different”, and “to get more diverse experience and challenge” themselves. Interestingly, they viewed the rural placement as a “frontier” experience, or a “rite of passage in becoming an experienced teacher” as one participant stated. Distance from family and friends and missing the “urban lifestyle” were common barriers discouraging them in taking up rural jobs.

My findings should the following; the first hypothesis: introducing pre-service teachers to rural teaching placements enhances their desire to seek a teaching position in a rural school, was not confirmed in this study. No participant altered their view of applying for a rural teaching job. While the rural placement was generally seen to be positive by all participants and a “rite of passage” by some to becoming a teacher, this did not impact their future career destinations. When I explored factors which might influence their decision to go ‘rural’, employment security (i.e. a two year teaching contract) and securing jobs within their areas of specialisation were the common reasons cited as most important. The current employment uncertainty, with increasing short-term casual contracts (see Pietsch & Williamson 2010, Productivity Commission 2012), that pervades the teaching profession could be advantageous for rural schools offering job security to new graduates. In addition, the small class sizes and strong school-community relationship praised by all participants added appeal to working in

rural towns. The second hypothesis: pre-service teachers from regional or rural backgrounds are more likely to seek a teaching job in rural places than their urban counterparts, was confirmed. The two pre-service teachers who had connections to rural communities seriously considered a teaching career in rural schools. Their first-hand experiences within rural communities created a familiarity allowing them to imagine a life away from the city.

Scholarly significance of the study

This study provides an important insight into the motivation and barriers faced by pre-service teachers during their voluntary rural placement experience as part of their Master of Teaching degree. The experiences of the participants draw interesting parallels and distinctions with existing local and international research. One of the significant findings of this study is the persistent deficit view about rural schooling from urban tertiary institutions (Halsey 2009, White et al. 2011). Furthermore, while the placement enhanced a positive view of working in rural places, the experience was used by the majority of participants as a stepping stone or learning stage to return fully-trained to an urban school. These findings suggest that whilst teacher education programs in urban institutions are providing pre-service teachers with access to rural schools through teaching placements, greater work needs to be done to highlight the need for committed teachers who are willing to look beyond 'the experience' and to counteract rural deficit discourses circulating in their curriculum.

The small sample prevents us from making generalizations; however consistency of participants' teaching preferences before and after the placement suggests that incentives from public policies should place the emphasis on supporting graduate teachers from rural

and regional areas in gaining and retaining jobs in rural schools. As this study and previous research has shown, they seem to be the best bet in terms of solving this perennial problem.

Recommendations for the Quality ITE Review:

1. **Monetary and other material incentives matter:** these are important ways of incentivising pre-service teachers and quality graduates to seek a regional, rural and remote teaching career. However, as my study (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Cuervo, 2020) shows alone these incentives are not enough to properly redress the problem of regional, rural and remote shortage of teaching staff.
2. **Grow your own - The rural factor or subjectivity of prospective teachers also matters:** From the first round of interviews (pre-placement) it became clear that the two participants with a 'rural' subjectivity (i.e. currently living in and originally from a rural town) were the most committed to working in a rural school. I argue that a relational approach to place and people is critical for young professionals to commit to take a post in a rural school (Cuervo, 2012; 2016). Contrary to individualistic or economic occupational transition approaches that rely on material and monetary forms of incentives, findings in this research found that a subjectivity or consciousness to being rural is critical to gain a spatial awareness of what rural schools and communities can offer and be attracted to teaching in this environment. Both participants have grown up in rural places and one was in a relationship with a rural subject. (After three

years of the research, these 3 participants are still currently working and living in a rural area.)

3. **Rural schools and education suffer of metrocentric cultural disrespect:** those participants in the study that originally were from urban places, while they appreciate many issues from rural teaching, they also saw the rural experience as a “training”, “boot camp”, and “frontier” experience rather than a real possibility to build a professional career. This metrocentric view relates to a cultural disrespect of the teaching status of rural teaching. Rural schools, unfortunately, are still lacking cultural status vis a vis urban education – this is evident in the metrocentric curriculum and in the view by pre-service teachers that rural schools are a training ground for working in urban schools and that rural students lack aspirations (see Cuervo, 2020; Roberts, 20216).
4. **Rural education subjects should be compulsory in teacher education programs at universities:** the poor cultural status of rural schooling is also evidence in the lack of information and content of rural education in many teacher education programs in Australian universities (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). Much of the information participants in this study received about rural schooling was in the form of two “information” sessions and word-of-mouth knowledge they gather from other pre-service teachers. This means that there is room for introducing subjects that engage pre-service teachers with what to expect when going rural, benefits of living in rural communities, and advantages of becoming a rural teacher.

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