“TEACHING IN THE COUNTRY WOULD NOT BE SO BAD”: HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO FIND OUT?

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Abstract
Attracting and retaining high-quality teachers for rural and remote Australia continues to be a major issue for education departments and other teacher employing authorities. Historically, a wide range of incentives including extra salary, bonded scholarships and accelerated promotion have been used to staff rural schools. Expanding the number of pre-service teachers who experience teaching and living in a rural community first hand before they graduate may be another way to reduce problems of staffing of rural schools. Doing this would require addressing the costs for an individual to take a country pre-service placement. Using data from a national survey, the financial and personal costs of taking a rural pre-service teaching placement are quantified, together with the benefits and disadvantages, as a contribution towards achieving better resourced and more professionally designed rural pre-service teaching experiences.

Keywords: rural, pre-service teachers, costs

1. INTRODUCTION
During 1999—2000, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education in Australia (HREOC, 2000a). The Commission found, among other things, that “most teacher training does not adequately equip new recruits with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching in rural and remote Australia” (HREOC, 2000b, p. 43). Consequently, HREOC recommended that:

All teacher training institutions should require undergraduates to study a module on teaching in rural and remote communities, offer all students an option to undertake a fully-funded practical placement (teaching experience) in a rural or remote school and assist rural communities in the direct recruitment of new graduates for their schools. (HREOC, 2000b, p. 44)

Three questions about preparing teachers for rural schools and living in rural communities have been derived from the finding and the recommendation to structure this paper. First, what does a “fully-funded practical placement in a rural or remote school cost” for a pre-service teacher? Secondly, what “skills and knowledge [and advantages] for teaching in rural and remote Australia” are acquired from a rural placement? Thirdly, what are the disadvantages of taking a rural pre-service placement, and what might be done to reduce or eliminate them?

A survey conducted in 2006, using a nationally-based sample of pre-service teachers who had completed at least one rural placement and were still enrolled in a teacher education course, is the basis for analysing and considering the questions (see Appendix 1). In relation to quantifying the overall cost of a rural placement, two aspects are dealt with—financial, and those of a more personal kind like separation from family and partners.

Pre-service rural teacher placements are a major, annual logistical exercise as well as being an injection of substantial ‘limited-duration’ additional resources into schools and communities. The placement process directly engages pre-service teachers, at least one or more of their lecturers, administrators who develop and maintain the infrastructure to enable placements to occur, often family members and partners, local communities and businesses and, very importantly, schools, staff and students. It is estimated from data in a national mapping of pre-service placements in Australia completed by the Rural Education Forum Australia (2005), that universities organise well in excess of 10,000 pre-service placements in rural schools annually.

The next section comprises the contextual framing for the paper. This is followed by a summary of the costs of taking a rural pre-service placement in terms of those which have a ‘dollar value’ and those of a more personal and relational kind. The perceived benefits and disadvantages of a rural pre-service placement are then considered. The paper concludes with a policy and financial challenge for governments and education agencies.
2. CONTEXTUAL FRAMING

The challenge of attracting and retaining teachers for rural schools is part of the wider issue of attracting and retaining professionals of all kinds for non-metropolitan postings (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe, & Noonan, 2004). However, there are several factors that drive the need to more deeply understand what might be done to enhance the attraction and retention of staff in rural schools. They include: the size and composition of the national teacher workforce, its age profile, the growing urgency to ‘guarantee’ replacement of staff for schools due to the retirement rates of Baby Boomers, and the propensity for young professionals to opt for greater mobility and flexibility of employment over stability.

While staffing rural schools has been problematic for over a century in Australia, the last 20 years has seen an intensification of interest in this (Boylan, 2004; Green, & Reid 2004; Herschell, 1998). In 1987, the then Commonwealth Schools Commission (report published in 1988) advised the Minister for Employment, Education and Training of the day that:

Attracting staff and maintaining reasonable staffing continuity can be difficult in schools in remote areas. Staff in these schools can find that their preparation for teaching in remote schools and the extent of professional support available are insufficient. (p. 1).

Submissions to the Schools Commission by education authorities and teachers consistently emphasised that “teachers feel, or are, ill-equipped to face the realities of living and working in rural and remote areas” (p. 141). And, “adjustment to rural teaching can be facilitated through improved pre-service teacher preparation” (p. 142). As well, “there is considerably more that teacher training institutions could do to encourage their students to consider teaching in rural areas, especially those students who show a predisposition towards an appointment to remote schools” (p. 145).

In advocating changes to the way teachers were being prepared for rural and remote schools, the Commission argued that “teachers in rural schools face special challenges and conditions not necessarily experienced by other teachers” (p. 139). It also asserted that “a successful adjustment to a rural appointment...include[s] the preparation for teaching prior to appointment” [my emphasis] p. 140).

Fast forwarding to 2000, HREOC, as quoted above, virtually repeated the calls made two decades earlier by the Schools Commission of the urgent need to address problems in the way teachers were being prepared for teaching and living in rural communities.

In addition to national enquiries and reports into education in rural and remote areas, there have been numerous state initiatives aimed at addressing rural education issues such as: the Beyond the Line initiative in New South Wales (Boylan & Wallace, 2001); the development of a framework for rural and remote education in Queensland; the establishment of a Ministerial Rural and Remote Education Advisory Committee in Western Australia; and country practicum scholarships in South Australia. As well, universities have spearheaded research into professional preparation for living and working in rural contexts, such as: the Queensland University of Technology teacher mentor flexible delivery program (Ballantyne & Mylonas, 2001); the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University; the University of New England through a national rural and regional areas science, mathematics and ICT focus; and Flinders University’s undergraduate Teaching in Rural and Regional Communities program. As well, following HREOC’s inquiry, the Australian Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2001) developed and approved a National Framework for Rural and Remote Education.

Notwithstanding the diversity and depth of enquiries and reports, the research and the initiatives, the issue of attracting and retaining teachers in rural schools continues to be problematic. Given what is occurring in many rural areas through the impacts of drought, climate change and globalisation (Cocklin & Dibden (Eds.) 2005; Alston and Kent, 2006) and demographic shifts, especially in relation to youth (Salt, 2004), challenges associated with attracting and retaining professionals to rural areas will persist and are likely to intensify.
3. THE FINANCIAL COSTS OF A RURAL PLACEMENT

In this section, the main cost drivers of taking a rural pre-service placement are presented together with the dollar value of the various expenses that students have to meet.

There are two primary factors that frame the overall cost of rural pre-service teaching placement. They are the duration and the distance travelled for a placement. The research being used to inform this paper found that the mean length of a rural placement is 26 school days. In calendar time, this equates to more than five weeks in a rural community, assuming an individual does not return home during a placement. Secondly, the mean distance travelled for a rural placement is 436 kilometres.

Essentially there are six known expenses that contribute towards the financial cost of a rural pre-service teaching placement. They are transport, accommodation, personal and professional preparation, meals, loss of income from paid employment, and care provisions where required. In addition there are costs of a relational kind to which dollar figures are harder to assign but which are nevertheless seen as a cost by at least some who take a rural placement. All amounts quoted are averages.

Transport expenses for a rural placement amount to $391, with nearly 80% of travel being by car. Accommodation expenses for most rural pre-service participants are of two kinds: money to retain ‘home base’ or university accommodation, and money to pay for accommodation while on placement. Accommodation adds $383 to the cost of a rural practicum. Personal and professional preparation expenses—buying some new clothes ‘to look like a teacher’, organising teaching aids, upgrading communications and the like, contribute $333. Meals add a further $376 to the cost, and in factoring this into the total, it needs to be noted that food as an item has to be met by pre-service students who remain in metropolitan schools, though there is a ‘country loading factor’ impact. Paying for care services such as child minding and support for a partner with a disability while on placement adds another $376, but only 5% who participated in the research had to meet this type of cost.

The largest cost of taking a rural placement is generated through loss of income from paid employment—$1,070. Over 55% (121) of survey respondents said they received no income from paid work during their placement. However, 41% (90) said they received some financial support during their placement, which amounted to $522. Assuming some overlap in the two sets of responses, all students who take a placement and have regular paid employment are at least $548 out of pocket. Parents and family (20) were most often cited as providing financial support for taking a rural placement, followed by universities (19), and state departments of education (16).

In summary (see Table 1), it costs an average of $2,553 for a pre-service teacher to undertake a 26 school day rural placement, travelling around 450 kilometres. If the cost of providing care is added, the total becomes $2,920. These amounts translate to weekly costs of $510 and $584, which are 61% and 70% respectively of the Australian seasonally adjusted estimate of “All employees total earnings” for August 2006 (ABS, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost Driver</th>
<th>Travel</th>
<th>Accom(^a)</th>
<th>Personal Prep(^b)</th>
<th>Meals</th>
<th>Loss of income</th>
<th>Total cost 'no care'</th>
<th>Total cost 'with care'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>$391</td>
<td>$383</td>
<td>$333</td>
<td>$376</td>
<td>$1,070</td>
<td>$2,553</td>
<td>$2,920</td>
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4. THE PERSONAL COSTS OF A RURAL PLACEMENT

While some pre-service teachers choose a rural placement as a preference and ‘take on board’ the costs and issues as a ‘natural consequence’ of their decision, for others, the sense of the personal cost is more pronounced. Disruption and disturbance to established routines, especially where family and children are concerned, are significant aspects of the personal costs of taking a rural placement. To illustrate, “my husband had to take holidays to look after the children, thus did not get shift penalties, just [his] base wage”. 

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\(^a\) Not including university accommodation

\(^b\) Includes clothes, teaching aids, communications, etc.
Foregoing income from paid employment in dollar terms has been quantified in the previous section. There are, however, other costs associated with loss of income from employment that contribute to the full cost of taking a rural pre-service placement. Chief among these is the probability of not continuing in paid employment at the completion of a placement. Twenty-eight respondents said they were unable to return to their job after their country placement. Other comments by survey respondents show that returning to former paid employment can involve penalties and struggles such as:

"I lost a few hours but I have since made it back to my regular hours"

"...my job was replaced by another while I was away...my hours halved"

"...each time I needed to beg for my hours to return..."

As well, for some rural pre-service participants, there is the cost of dealing with changed perceptions of them as employees—"my manager now believes that I am unreliable, and I am waiting for her to roster me again". Another instance of the personal cost of taking a rural placement which, as stated earlier, interrupts established routines and employer expectations, is doing extra non-paid work to 'get things back to normal' just to keep a job—"I had to spend a lot of unpaid overtime re-organising...because casuals were used to fill my position and they were not familiar with all the minor aspects of the job". It is also clear from this comment that some pre-service teachers have jobs entailing considerable knowledge and management expertise, and they appear to assume responsibility for the way things are done during their absence, which is another 'hidden' pressure on them.

5. BENEFITS OF TAKING A RURAL PRE-SERVICE PLACEMENT

There appear to be four types of benefits of a rural pre-service placement. They are: reinforcement of positive views already held about teaching in a rural school; expansion of professional horizons and opportunities; an awakening of interest in community; and possible reassessment of employment options.

In the research, there were 148 responses from individuals that indicated a country placement reinforced or confirmed that teaching in a rural school was what they wanted to do. Examples of comments of this type include:

"I know I want to teach in a country school."

"Yes, I have decided that country service would be of great benefit to me personally and professionally."

"My enjoyment of teaching in this area has allowed me to put my hand up for country service."

"Yes, I'm confident to teach in small towns now. The small town chatting and clique-ishness takes some getting used to. But there is great friendliness too".

The reinforcing impact of a rural placement does, however, need to be read in terms of the majority of survey respondents indicating they mostly thought of themselves as a country person. By contrast, eight respondents said their country pre-service placement either confirmed that rural was not for them or that they would prefer a metropolitan posting. Thirteen respondents said their country placement had no impact on them because they had always intended to teach in the country and twelve reported their country placement made them realize a rural appointment 'would be ok'. Comments here include:

"...it showed me that teaching in the country would not be so bad."

"I would consider teaching in the country in the future."

"I am now open to the idea of working in a country school".

In terms of the advantages of taking a country placement, 17 respondents specifically mentioned the benefits of small schools, small class sizes and diversity (probably of teaching experiences
given that teachers in small schools frequently have to teach outside their field(s) of professional preparation). Twenty-eight respondents highlighted the environment of country schools being an advantage. One lengthy response captures a range of benefits of taking a rural placement:

[A rural placement] broadens horizons, exposes pre-service teachers to different lifestyles, attitudes, priorities, approaches, prepares us for likelihood of teaching in country school, get to see and understand more about Australia, and Australians, takes us out of comfort zone, develops networks (professional & social), is character building and helps to put the course & future into a different perspective—uncovers some unknowns.

Also in relation to perceived benefits of taking a rural pre-service placement, 37 respondents commented that they had gained a first-hand sense of community and of experiencing life in a rural community. Comments include:

“The experience is unbeatable. The people in the country areas are so nice and kind to you. Plus the resources the school had were amazing and how the community got involved in school events and activities was great.”

“It provides you with a different cultural experience…”

“The country is a very inviting place. The country service requires you to become more involved in extra curricula activities with the school and also in the community.”

“Seeing how a small community works, how teachers and students have connections outside of the classroom…opportunity to work with Koorie students.”

Thirty respondents listed the quality and type of student interactions and the range of teaching experiences as benefits of taking a pre-service country placement. For example, one respondent said, “you are able to focus completely on the task at hand and you are given more opportunities as a pre-service teacher” in a rural school while doing a placement. From another, “kids are nice, people are friendly; in my case it has developed links with the community”.

An opportunity to compare city and country teaching contexts as an advantage of taking a country placement was identified by 36 respondents. In addition to the opportunity to compare city teaching with teaching in the country, seven respondents cited personal benefits from taking a rural pre-service placement, such as: “stepping out of your comfort zone is healthy” and two said that the opportunity to teach Indigenous students was especially valuable.

6. DISADVANTAGES OF TAKING A RURAL PRE-SERVICE PLACEMENT

The commentary on the disadvantages of taking a rural pre-service placement essentially parallel the data in Table 1 and mainly centre on various cost pressures. However, the frequency of the disadvantages derived from the survey responses adds richness to the statistics in the table. Eighty respondents said cost was a major problem; 47 cited travel and distance; 13 identified accommodation.

The comment “I had to sleep on a swag for 8 weeks” from one respondent, while it may evoke notions of ‘doing it tough for a good cause’, underlines having to make do on basics, which in turn is not conducive to a rural placement being a professionally significant, formative event. In addition, 29 respondents cited loneliness and separation from friends and family; 20 listed isolation as a problem they had to cope with; 6 said lack of university supervision; 19 nominated a lack of resources for teaching; 9 said that you are not able to work (i.e. had no regular income); and 11 referred to the limited range of options in schools and fewer students than in the city.

7. CONCLUSION

Undertaking a pre-service rural teaching placement is a costly exercise averaging $2,553 for a 26-day assignment. By far the largest component (up to 42%) of this amount is the income lost from paid employment. In addition, some students, when they attempt to resume their employment, find they no longer have a job or they have to accept reduced conditions. As well, there are personal, non-quantifiable types of costs that have to be dealt with to take a rural placement, like disruptions and disturbances to family relationships and routines. Put another way, in some circumstances, the
cost-burden of a pre-service rural teaching placement is carried by partners, children and carers, as well the individual directly involved.

While there are costs and some disadvantages, there are also substantial benefits that accrue to an individual when they undertake a rural placement as part of their teacher education program. Probably the most significant benefit is that an extended period of teaching and living in a rural community provides insights and opportunities that can only be gained by being immersed in ‘place’ (Gruenewald, 2003).

While this paper has focussed primarily on rural placements from the perspective of individual pre-service teachers, there are substantial benefits to teacher employing authorities when they can recruit for their schools from a pool of graduates who have first-hand experience of rural contexts. Perhaps it is time to have some of the financial cost of rural pre-service teaching placements met by education departments and/or school sectors?

When asked how much financial support would encourage pre-service teachers to take a rural placement, respondents to the national survey said about $1,000. Given that the actual cost of a pre-service rural placement is more than double this amount, the response is really a policy and funding bargain!

For $10 million annually, departments of education—governments—could become partners with 10,000 pre-service teachers in renewing Australia’s rural teaching workforce needs each year. If this opportunity were taken up, something very significant about improving the attraction and retention of teachers for rural and remote schools would be ignited.

8. REFERENCES


9. APPENDIX 1

**Pre service country teaching costings survey**

The pre-service costings survey was designed for students currently enrolled in a teaching qualification program and who had completed a country placement—the rationale for the former point was to meet university research ethics requirements; the rationale for the latter was that they would have actual experience to draw upon for answering the questions.

All universities/teacher education providers were invited to have up to 30 pre-service students, randomly identified by alphabetical order and who satisfied the criteria as above, participate in the on-line survey.

The costings survey comprised 32 questions.

Questions 1—10 focused on respondent background and context information such as university and degree program, age, gender and length of country placement.

Questions 11—27 focused on various cost generators and any support that respondents accessed. These included income lost from paid employment, accommodation, the experience of returning to employment following placement, and any sources and amounts of financial support for a placement.

Question 28 focused on the amount of financial support respondents thought would be required to encourage pre-service teachers to take a country placement.

Questions 29—32 focused on personal impacts, advantages, disadvantages and any other advice about a pre-service country placements.

217 survey responses were received from 19 teacher education provider sites, which represents about a 48% site participation rate. There were some sites that provide teacher education programs where the timing of the survey and/or the current provision of offerings meant that it was not appropriate for them to participate in the survey. In terms of participation in the survey, no attempt was made to verify any of the returns, given the anonymity agreements of the survey.

Further information about the pre-service country teaching costings survey is available at http://www.refa.edu.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=4240&cid=15331&id=73218

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\(i\) Quotation from the pre-service country teaching costings survey responses.