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Rural Pre-Service Professional Placements

Recommendation

That the Commonwealth Government invests \$15 million annually for 10 years on a national rural pre-service teaching practice program- *Teachers for Rural Australia*- as a strategic contribution to raising educational outcomes.

Introduction and framing

The Productivity Commission on Schools Workforce reported on “extending the practicum experience of pre-service teachers to better enable them to develop the required practical skills....greater use of internships....formal university-school partnerships” and a range of other matters as ways of improving pre-service teacher preparation and thereby, student outcomes.

This brief submission draws attention to the potential to enhance the pre-service preparation of teachers by locating teaching students in rural schools and communities for an extended period prior to graduation, and providing funding for it to occur.

As is well known, the issue of attracting and retaining highly qualified and skilled teachers to non-urban appointments continues to present major challenges for education systems in Australia. A very wide range of employment incentives are currently used albeit with varying degrees of success, yet the problem endures.

While incentives- such as monetary, housing, accelerated promotion, return to city rights, study leave- will need to continue, it is time to look for other ways to enhance the status, esteem and value placed by the teaching profession and others on being a *rural* teacher.

In 2000 The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education recommended:

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, 2000, p 44, emphasis added).

For more than a decade, the recommendation has languished as outcomes of country students (with few exceptions) have consistently been lower than urban counterparts, and as stated above, meeting the core requirements for quality schooling have arguably increased in complexity beyond metropolitan contexts and the handful of very large regional centres in Australia.

Towards normalising an extended rural practicum for pre-service teachers

Kotter (2002) summarises his findings on change as “people change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* a truth that influences their *feelings*” (p.1, emphasis in original). This approach to change, together with other relevant research, informed and underpinned an extended rural practicum pilot at Flinders University in 2011. In short “to be *shown*” in terms of a teaching practicum means going into a school and community and staying long enough to move beyond first impressions and the excitement of being on your ‘final prac’ before graduating.

The Flinders University Extended Rural Professional Placement (ERPP) initiative for final year teaching students commenced in January 2011 and ran for 2 school terms/1 academic semester.

Following promotion of the ERPP in 2010, 8 final year students from 15 who expressed interest, after interviews, took the ERPP option- 7 in the Riverland, 1 each at Loxton, Glossop, Renmark, Berri, Monash, Barmera and Waikerie, and 1 in the South East at Moorak.

The Riverland area was chosen because of extensive work done by principals over several years to prepare for having pre-service students placed in schools for an extended period. As well, Flinders University has a successful Rural Medicine campus and program in the Riverland which is well known to school leaders. It kept a “fertile question” (Harpaz & Lefstein, 2000) before them- ‘if doctors in training are being successfully placed in a rural community for up to a year, why not teachers?’

At the end of 2011, 4 students graduated as primary/junior primary teachers, 1 middle school and 2 secondary with specialisations in mathematics, science and physical education/health. Five are now employed, 4 in rural schools, 3 of which hosted the students for their ERPP, and 1 in metropolitan Adelaide.

Students were encouraged and supported to become involved in their local community via sport, community events and through school based activities. Some also obtained part-time employment in local businesses. A ‘condition’ of being selected for the ERPP was students staying locally most weekends so they could experience living and working at close quarters with children, their parents and others.

The Yulgibar Foundation provided \$30,000 for the ERPP and Credit Union SA, \$2,000. Most of the funding was allocated to students as a living allowance and to support the cost of accommodation. The Department of Education and Children's Services in the Riverland also provided funding for the ERPP which went directly to the participating schools.

Evaluation of the Extended Rural Professional Placement

The evaluation report of the 2011 ERPP is available at http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/fms/education_files/coreacom/Resource_papers/Evaluation_Report_Extended_Rural_Professional_Practicum_September_2011.pdf

Further research on the impact of the ERPP on participants in their transition to employment and full time teaching will be conducted in 2012 and subsequent years, subject to agreement by respondents.

Participating students, supervising teachers and host principals each highly rated the ERPP. Academic staff, while mainly supportive of the ERPP, reported it increased their workload and consideration needs to be given to how students on an ERPP can receive more support and advice from them, and maintain connections with students who did not take the ERPP.

Being located in a rural school and community continuously for a semester had a marked impact on the pre-service teachers, notwithstanding having to relocate to the country, live on a modest budget and continue to meet their other academic commitments.

The benefits included, but were not limited to, being in a school for the set up and commencement of the school year, feeling like a member of the school, being fully immersed as a teacher (eg, planning sports days, talking to parents etc.), developing their own personal teaching style, and gaining a fuller understanding of the workload of a teacher. Students reported that the importance of relationships and the building of relationships was emphasised to them by their placement. Several students also reported their confidence was bolstered by the experience, and the benefits from teacher mentors were especially high given the 6 month timeframe.

The ABC Landline Program *Finishing School* broadcast on 11 September 2011 has additional perspectives from students and others on the ERPP.

Funding country placements

The current funding to meet the essential costs of locating pre-service teachers in country schools-rural, regional and remote- providing quality supervision and feedback, and ensuring study and counselling services are available when and as needed, is simply inadequate.

Compared with the funding available for training and supporting Rural GPs and a range of other health services personnel, funding for rural teaching practicums amounts to little more than generous pocket money.

Given how fundamentally important it is to ensure *all* students are taught by highly qualified teachers, and given how governments and others continually argue the merits of quality education for *all*, increasing funding for country placements ought to be made a national priority.

In 2006 I researched the out-of-pocket cost of a pre-service teacher opting to take a country placement for the Rural Education Forum Australia. Every university in Australia with a teacher education program was invited to have students participate in the research. 217 student survey responses were received from 19 teacher education provider sites, which represented about a 48% site participation rate.

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 latter was that they would have actual experience to draw upon for answering the questions; the rationale for the former was to meet university research ethics requirements.

Following is an extract of the results from my 2009 paper on the research:

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 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 1: Summary of the financial costs of a 26 day rural pre-service placement Cost Driver	Travel	Accom ⁿ	Personal Prep ⁿ	Meals	Loss of income	Total cost 'no care'	Total cost 'with care'
Mean	\$391	\$383	\$333	\$376	\$1,070	\$2,553	\$2,920

The results of the 2006 rural practicum research, even when no increase for CPI and so forth is factored in, translate into a semester length (20 weeks) rural placement costing a student \$10,212. The costs of university staff and mentor teacher supervision and feedback, and on-line topic development and delivery, assuming some academic studies continue while students are on placement, also have to be factored in.

While supervision rates vary from state as do travel costs, a mentor teacher in South Australia is currently paid \$17.40 per day and a sessional university supervisor costs nearly \$42 per hour plus travel.

A desktop estimate of mentoring and supervision for 1 student placed in a rural school 250 kms from a capital city for 20 weeks and visited 4 times by a university supervisor, would cost:

• Mentor teacher	\$1,740
• University supervision inc (travel and 8 hours x 4)	\$3,344
Total	\$5,084

In round figures then, the cost of a semester length rural placement is approximately \$15- \$16,000 using the data set out immediately above- the upper figure provides for some distance topic development and delivery.

The key point, albeit using desk top calculations, is that the overall cost to the Australian Government of funding a semester length rural placement is not excessive, especially when distributed over (even) a 5 year successful rural appointment upon graduation.

The 2006 rural placement costings research showed that approximately 12,000 students were involved in a rural placement each year. The research also found that students thought around \$900 would encourage a pre-service teacher to take a country placement. While this student figure is significantly less than the real cost data reported earlier, it offers the possibility of pre-service teachers being inclined to take an extended rural placement if the funding offered is reasonable.

Action

An investment of \$15 million annually by the Australian government would purchase approximately 1,000 semester length rural placements and over a 10 year period, make a major contribution to the *rural* teacher workforce.

Concluding remarks

High quality teachers are the foundation for good schools; for good schools to become great schools; for good education to become great education. Rural children and families deserve the best – locally- as well as through connection to the ‘best anywhere’.

Providing a *real* choice for pre-service teachers to live, teach and learn in a rural community before they graduate will advance one of the foundation pillars of Australia - vibrant productive rural communities- good for locals, good for *all* Australians.

The big national project for the 21st century is building a sustainable Australia. Population growth is the primary driver of this.

Historically, rural schools and rural education have been centre-pieces of Australia’s growth and development. Globalisation and rationalisation of services- both government and private- have severely dented this.

A national, well funded rural pre-service teacher placement program would be a major contribution towards ensuring Australia, looking forward to 2050, is a vibrant, productive, civil, inclusive and sustainable democratic society.

References

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