Preparing teachers to teach in rural schools: An Australian perspective

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Abstract
Over the past thirty years, there have been many Australian federal and state government reports, studies, inquiries and reviews into rural teacher education. Broadly, these documents have focussed on the continuum from the preparation of prospective teachers for appointment in rural communities and their schools through to the support and enhancement of professional practice by continued professional learning programmes for Australian rural and remote teachers. Collectively these inquiries have indicated that the preparation of teachers for rural school appointment requires specific attention being devoted to the exploration of a range of pedagogical, curricular, professional development, social, cultural, geographical, historical, political, service access and personal issues that define the differences between working and living in rural contexts compared to other locations. An analysis of the literature sought to identify these pre-service teacher education preparation issues and generatively identify what the necessary elements for a rural pre-service programme should include. This analysis and review generated to six essential elements or programme inclusions with more specific themes within each element being elaborated. A profile of the rural focus contained within the respective primary (K-6) and secondary (7-12) pre-service teacher education programmes for each tertiary institution within New South Wales was developed through close examination of their public programme documentation available in their respective university handbooks.

Introduction
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.

At the policy level, there has been a recognition that rural staffing, especially ‘difficult to staff schools and locations’, is an emergent priority issue (Scott, 1990; Yarrow, Ballantyre, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999; and, Boylan, 2008). Many authors, both in Australia and internationally (e.g. AEU, 2001; HREOC, 2000; Roberts, 2005; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003 and Barley, 2009), declare that teacher supply is facing severe shortages which will worsen in the near future. Australian school teachers are more concentrated in the 45 – 54 age range. This has been confirmed by the research by Roberts (2005) for the New South Wales teaching workforce who identified that the teacher average age was 49 years of age.
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).

In this article, rural pre-service teacher education is the focus. Three inter-related aspects of rural pre-service teacher education are examined. These are: 1) a synthesis of relevant Australian and international literature to generate a set of fundamental course inclusions, called elements, in pre-service teacher education programmes; 2) an examination of the state of provision of rural pre-service teacher education courses and rural practice teaching experiences within teacher education institutions in New South Wales, Australia; and, 3) validation from rural practitioners about what should be included in the design of a rural education subject within a pre-service programme.

Syntheses of the Literature
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 concept of a rural lens (Wallace & Boylan, 2007) is used to focus specifically on the second and third strategies and to elucidate the elements within each of these two strategies that enhance rural pre-service teacher education programmes.

Research questions
The first focus for this paper sought to synthesis from the literature what the specific needs of and the essential preparation experiences for prospective teacher education students should be prior to their first rural teaching appointment. Collectively the literature and Australian federal and state government-led inquiries have affirmed that the preparation of teachers for rural school appointments requires specific attention being devoted to the exploration of a range of pedagogical, curricular, social, cultural, geographical, historical, political, service access and personal adjustment issues that define the difference between working and living in rural contexts compared to other locations. 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 second focus sought to validate the set of course elements or inclusions generated 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 third focus examined the institutional course offerings of all 12 New South Wales tertiary institutions 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).

**Methodology**

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 twelve NSW tertiary institutions’ 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 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 programme structure: Compulsory or optional?

3. Did the programme include a rural practice teaching experience as a compulsory or optional component of the programme?

**Analytical and/or theoretical 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 12 NSW tertiary institutions 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**

1. **Key elements for a rural pre-service course**

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 programme. These elements are:

- **Element 1. Teaching and learning focussed**

  This element includes exploration, examination, developing understandings of, and engaging in classroom place-based practice. Drawing from the literature (e.g. Sharplin, 2008) and reviews of Boylan (2008) and Roberts (2005) the following components of this element were expanded as follows:

  - multi-age teaching, its organisation, planning and programming and associated teaching skills;
  - catering for the needs of individual children in mixed ability settings;
  - promoting high academic standards;
  - developing effective classroom management skills;
  - recognising children at risk and developing appropriate programmes;
  - developing effective and appropriate teaching strategies and skills that include cultural awareness and sensitivity in catering for aboriginal children and children from differing cultural backgrounds;
  - curriculum organisation, planning and evaluation;
  - selecting relevant and contextually appropriate content; and,
  - effective time management strategies.
Element 2. Administration focussed
There are a range of school related administrative responsibilities with which pre-service students need to become familiar and to effectively carry out the following more specific roles:

- classroom organisation;
- small school administrative routines; and,
- rural appointment and retention strategies.

Element 3 Community focussed
As a newly appointed teacher in a rural place it often means that the beginning teacher has to substantively engage for the first time with the community in which they are required to live and work - something that can be a difficult aspect of their adjustment to rural teaching. This important pre-service element identifies the need for students to develop understandings of and be provided with opportunities to examine, analyse and discuss:

- strategies for engaging in successful community interaction;
- developing a knowledge of and an understanding of community dynamics that influence the teaching-learning environment;
- strategies for dealing with value clashes;
- strategies engaging parents;
- ways of identifying community values, needs and expectations; and,
- appreciating the climatic, historical, cultural and geographic implications of living in a rural place.

Element 4 Personal focussed
As part of the pre-service teacher education programme, students need to appreciate and reflect upon their personal lifestyle, recreational and socialising forces and analyse their suitability for a rural appointment. Here the Ankrah-Dove (1982) psycho-social Challenge – Deficit model provides a self-reflection framework to assist student to consider:

- the impact of isolation in its many facets on the individual;
- accessing and developing supportive personal networks with friends;
- ways of developing their self-efficacy; and,
- accommodation and service provisions.

Element 5 Field experience focussed
This element of a rural pre-service teacher education programme 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. For the teacher education institution, there is an expectation that the institution would provide financial support to assist the student to travel to and find suitable accommodation in these rural locations (HREOC, 2000). Key experiences and components of this field experience element should include:

- teaching experiences in rural schools, other rural settings and their communities; and,
- rural placements occurring early in the programme and culminating with a rural internship towards the conclusion of the programme; and,
- engaging in specific short-term rural sampler experience programmes such as the Beyond the Line programme (NSWDET, 2000)

Element 6 Professional learning focussed
The final element of a rural teacher education programme creates the link between the pre-service and the in-service education of rural teachers. The focus of this element is developing in the students a commitment to lifelong learning, and developing understanding about and strategies for how professional learning can be accessed from a rural location. Specifically, aspects that can be included in the pre-service programme include:
• keeping up-to-date with current major educational changes at the system and global level;
• accessing and developing supportive communication and interaction networks with colleagues, consultants, and or support groups; and,
• accessing on-going professional development.
2. **Rural teacher education in New South Wales**

The state of rural teacher education provision in pre-service teacher education programmes in all 12 NSW tertiary institutions has been documented. In the following table a longitudinal analysis of each institution’s offerings from 2002 to 2010 is shown.

**Table 1**
Profile of NSW teacher education programmes in 2002-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Concurrent Primary Programme</th>
<th>Concurrent Secondary Programme</th>
<th>End-on Secondary Programme</th>
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**Key:**
- CSU: Charles Sturt University
- UNE: University of New England
- SCU: Southern Cross University
- U New: University of Newcastle
- U Woll: University of Wollongong
- ACU: Australian Catholic University
- UTS: University of Technology Sydney
- Avon C: Avondale College (Privately funded)
The result of this document analysis revealed:
1. Only one institution had a compulsory rural education subject;
2. Three institutions have offered an elective subject in rural education; and,
3. Rural practice teaching was optional in all institutions.

3. Field validation of elements for pre-service programmes
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme elements</th>
<th>Tertiary Educators</th>
<th>School Administrators</th>
<th>Final Year Teacher Education Students</th>
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From Table 2 the essential programme inclusions associated with the pedagogy of place (i.e. teaching and learning matters) and community integration and interaction were ranked 1 or 2 by all groups. It is noted that while the rural tertiary educators and the final year rural teacher education students identified Teaching and learning matters as their most frequently mentioned issue, the rural school administrators identified Community issues as being their most frequently mentioned issue. Rural field experiences including practice teaching and internships and Personal issues of adjustment and isolation were ranked 3 or 4 by all respondents. Administration matters and professional learning matters were ranked 5 or 6 by all participants. Collectively, their responses provide field confirmation that the six essential programme elements generated from the literature synthesis are important and appropriate attributes of a programme or subject designed for the preparation of pre-service students for a rural teaching appointment.

4. Comparative analyses with UK institutions
The final focus for this paper 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. As part of this paper, 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.

Conclusion
This paper set out to explore how the literature can inform the design of a subject or course in rural education. The literature review has clearly established that there is a strong literature based case for designing subjects, programmes and courses that specifically prepare pre-service teachers for rural appointments as well as suggesting various inclusions in such a subject, programme or course. This
paper sought to synthesise the literature and generate the essential inclusions in such a subject, programme or course. The result of this process led to the identification of six essential design elements that were then field tested with groups of people with a variety of expertise and interests in rural education. The outcome of this exploration validated the set of six essential design elements that are reported in this paper.

The predominantly Australian literature examined in this paper revealed that while the need for preparing rural teachers is on-going and a real staffing issue for employer authorities, there is very little formal commitment by the New South Wales tertiary institutions to addressing the issue. This assertion was reinforced through the examination of pre-service programmes offered by the 12 tertiary institutions in New South Wales.

Through the longitudinal analysis of the ‘state of the art’ in rural teacher education preparation within New South Wales, this investigation revealed that only one of the 12 major tertiary institutions in New South Wales has included a compulsory subjects or course about rural education within its primary and/or secondary programmes. Disappointingly, no tertiary institution mandated compulsory rural practicum experiences for its students.

References


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