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Denise Beutel
Queensland University of Technology

Lenore Adie
Queensland University of Technology

Suzanne Hudson
Queensland University of Technology

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Promoting Rural and Remote Teacher Education in Australia through the Over the Hill Project

Denise Beutel, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia
Lenore Adie, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia
Suzanne Hudson, Queensland University of Technology, Queensland, Australia

Abstract: Attracting quality teachers to rural areas is an ongoing international concern. Teacher education institutions have been criticised for contributing to this problem by failing to raise an awareness of teaching in rural areas in their teacher education programs. This study investigates preservice teachers' perceptions towards teaching in rural areas after participating in a rural experience through the Over the Hill project. A self-selected group of second and third year preservice teachers from a regional campus of an urban Queensland university participated in a six-day rural experience, which included being billeted with local families, attending local community events and observing and teaching in rural primary and secondary schools. Data collected from the preservice teachers before and after the rural teaching experience were analysed to reveal positive perceptions towards teaching and living in rural communities. The findings revealed that even a brief immersion into rural schooling communities can positively influence preservice teachers' attitudes towards seeking rural teaching placements. These findings have implications for the ways in which teacher education institutions can promote rural teaching opportunities in their teacher education programs.

Keywords: Rural Teaching, Teacher Education, Rural Education

Introduction

AUSTRALIA IS A unique country. It is similar in size to the United States of America but with approximately 10% of the population (22.6 million compared with USA's almost 300 million). It is one of the world's most urbanized countries with an urban population of 89%. The urban communities are concentrated around the vast Australian coastline with cities separated geographically by large distances. Most of inland Australia is desert or semi-desert with the land generally of low agricultural quality. These regions are sparsely populated and quite isolated. The combination of large geographic distances, disproportionate population distribution along with significant contextual and cultural differences between urban and rural Australia contribute to an imbalance in the supply of teachers to rural areas (Lyons, 2009).

Staffing schools in rural and remote Australia presents significant challenges with few teachers selecting to take up teaching appointments in non-urban communities (Lyons, 2009). While this problem is not unique to Australia, with similar issues evidenced in other countries

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including the USA, Canada, UK, New Zealand, and Malaysia (Yates, 2007) current indications are that this problem will not abate in the near future (Lock, 2008; Yates, 2007).

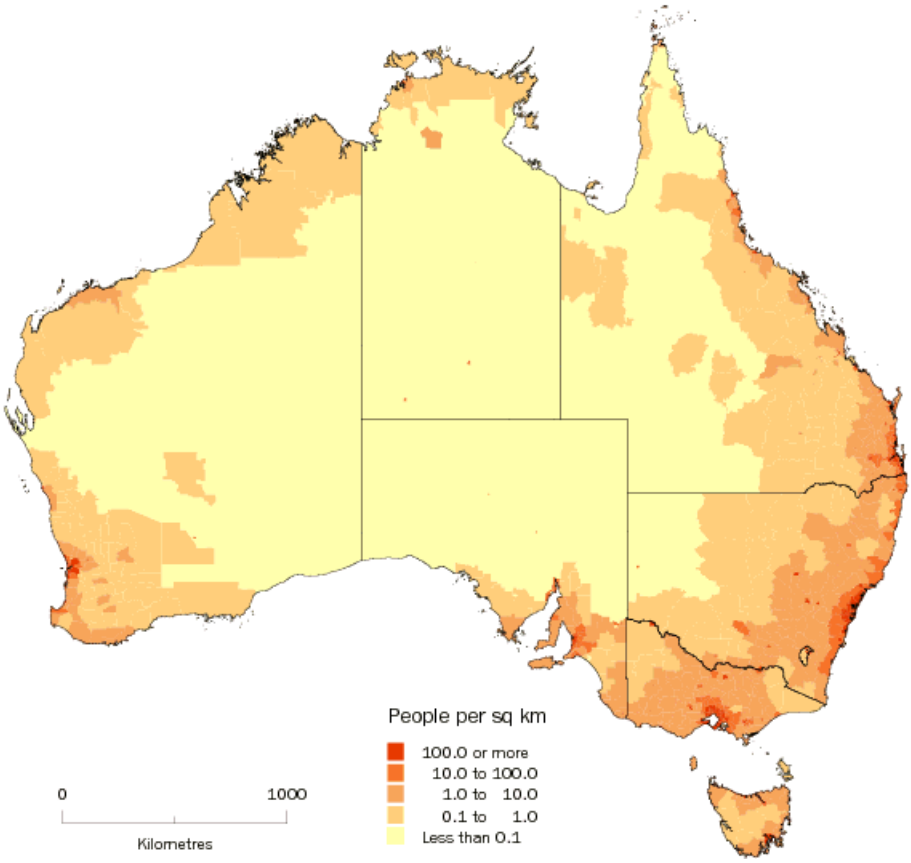

Figure 1: Population Density, Australia-June 2009 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010)

Teacher education institutions have an essential role to play in promoting teaching in rural regions. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's inquiry into rural and remote education (HREOC, 2000) placed the responsibility squarely on teacher education institutions stating that "most teacher training does not equip new recruits with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching in rural and remote Australia" (p. 43). In Australia, the overwhelming majority of teachers are trained in universities in urban areas with less than a quarter of all practicum placements taking place in non-metropolitan schools (Halsey, 2005). Furthermore, the majority of preservice teachers taking up rural placements come from regional universities or live in rural areas (White, 2006). Thus, it is argued that metropolitan universities need to consider how they might encourage their preservice teachers to experience a rural practicum.

Shortage of Teachers in Rural Areas

Over the last decade, Australian government reports have consistently identified difficulties in filling teacher vacancies in rural and remote schools (McKenzie, Kos, Walker, & Wong, 2008; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2004; 2008). The difficulty of staffing rural and remote schools has been linked to negative perceptions of teaching in these environments. Social, cultural and professional isolation either experienced or perceived, and high probabilities of teaching multi-grade classes have been identified as factors contributing to teacher shortages in rural regions (Munsch & Boylan, 2008). Halsey (2009) has argued that, to assist in addressing the low numbers of teachers who choose to work in rural schools, teachers need to be initiated into teaching and living in a rural community before they graduate.

While research has recognised the need for specialised preservice teacher education that includes social and professional aspects of teaching in rural contexts (Hudson & Hudson, 2008), to date the implementation of such programs by universities has been uncoordinated, random or limited (Sharplin, 2002; White & Reid, 2008). Sharplin (2002) explored the barriers that urban-based preservice teachers perceive as influencing their willingness to undertake rural placements. Findings from Sharplin's study revealed that the perceptions held by preservice teachers about the challenges of teaching rurally related to a lack of teaching resources, limited access to a support network of experienced teachers and a lack of awareness of the cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic status of rural students. Additionally, preservice teachers were concerned about how to fit into country life and the isolation associated with this change in lifestyle. While teachers in rural schools may feel isolated geographically, socially and professionally, there are many positive experiences associated with living and working beyond urban areas. Rural communities are viewed as quiet, aesthetically pleasing environments (Wright & Osborne, 2007) usually with a strong sense of community and a social atmosphere. In addition, the pace of life is considered more relaxed with a focus on community events and outdoor activities. Boylan & McSwan (1998) have suggested that the negative stereotype of past years, depicting rural schools as inferior and staffed by transient and inexperienced teachers, is unjustified with recent studies indicating satisfaction from teachers new to rural areas. Rather than focusing on a deficit view of rural life, these more positive aspects need to be promoted with potential beginning teachers. Teacher education institutions have a significant role to play in this regard in initiating preservice teachers into this way of thinking.

Initiatives to Support Rural Teaching

Ramsey (2000) called for innovative and cooperative endeavours to "ensure that teacher education meets the needs of regional, rural and remote communities" (p. 53). Teacher education institutions, often in partnership with employing authorities and rural and remote communities, are increasingly looking towards developing programs that familiarise preservice teachers with teaching in rural and remote contexts. Over recent years, initiatives have emerged from some Australian states. For example, in New South Wales the Bush Tracks project investigated the transitions that preservice teachers and beginning teachers experience in becoming teachers in rural schools (Bush Tracks Research Collective, 2006). While another initiative, the Rural (Teacher) Education Project, involved collaboration between two

rural universities and the major teacher employing authority in New South Wales. This project explored the notion of 'productive partnerships' in the provision of quality teaching and learning in rural schools (Green & Reid, 2004) and was underpinned by the belief that teacher education in both its initial and continuing forms should be a joint effort rather than the responsibility of universities alone.

A further scheme in New South Wales known as the Beyond the Line program was initiated by the NSW Department of Education and Training in partnership with interested universities (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2001). This five-day program gives preservice teachers a taste of teaching and living in rural NSW, by introducing them to schools and communities in western NSW. The key aim of the Beyond the Line program is to provide "a snapshot of a rural teacher's life, first-hand experience of country hospitality and the chance to discover more about country areas that hold the greatest number of employment opportunities" (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2011, p.1).

While Queensland has many isolated and sparsely populated communities with over half of all state schools and approximately one quarter of all students enrolled in state schools located in rural and remote areas (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2011), there has been a history of a lack of programs available in this state that encourage preservice teachers to participate in rural placements. Over recent years, the Beyond the Range Professional Experience Grants program has been initiated to "support high-achieving, preservice teachers to undertake a professional experience placement in a rural or remote Queensland state school" (Queensland Department of Education and Training, 2011, n.p.). This program offers financial and professional support to suitably qualified preservice teachers to experience a practicum in a rural or remote Queensland state school.

The Over the Hill project at the centre of this study has been implemented to further address the low numbers of preservice teachers wishing to teach in rural and remote areas in Queensland. Originally initiated by a Queensland university in partnership with a school principal, it calls for a rethinking of the ways in which teacher education institutions might engage with rural communities and raise awareness of preservice teachers towards living and working in rural and remote Australian settings.

Context Description

This study is set in a small regional campus of a large urban university in Queensland, Australia. In 2005 the Bachelor of Education (Primary) was introduced at the campus. In keeping with the Campus Strategic Plan that promotes community engagement and consultation with the profession, the Faculty of Education met regularly with interested principals and key stakeholders to discuss the state of education and look at ways to address key educational concerns and issues. A matter frequently raised was concern over the lack of graduates willing to accept positions in rural and remote communities. Subsequent focus group meetings with preservice teachers at the campus confirmed principals' perceptions that very few would consider applying to teach in a rural and remote community upon graduation. As a way forward, the Over the Hill project was developed in consultation with the then principal of a small rural state school in western Queensland. Finding it difficult to staff his school, he reflected upon his own teacher education experience in NSW and his participation in the Beyond the Line program funded by the NSW Department of Education.

Hence, the Over the Hill program was developed using the Beyond the Line initiative as a model.

The first Over the Hill program ran in 2006 and due to recurring demand has been successfully continuing for four years. Now viewed as a partnership arrangement between the university and a cluster of public schools in western Queensland, the purpose of the program is to provide a "taste" of living and teaching in an isolated community to assist preservice teachers to make informed future career decisions. The six-day volunteer program includes teaching in a rural school and participating in community activities. Table 1 below provides an overview of the six-day Over the Hill schedule.

Table 1: Sample Schedule for the Over the Hill Program

Day	**Activity**
Saturday afternoon	Pre Service teachers arrive and check into rooms at local hotel Time to explore the local community Group dinner and entertainment at local hotel
Sunday morning Sunday afternoon	Visit to Environmental Education Centre for high ropes course and viewing facilities Preservice teachers are collected by, or transported to local host families
Monday Tuesday Wednesday	Participation in class at host school
Thursday	Return to Brisbane Preservice teachers record their reflections of their rural and remote experience while on the journey home

Data Collection and Analysis

This small-scale qualitative study focused upon the perceptions of the fourth group of preservice teachers who experienced the Over the Hill program in 2010. This research is viewed as an interpretive study as it sought to gather data from the perspectives of the participants (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). Data were collected from the participants through questionnaires and individual reflections. The table below shows the data source, and the timing and purpose of the data collection.

Table 2: Summary of Data Source, and the Timing and the Purpose of the Data Collection

Data Source	When Collected	Purpose
Questionnaire	Several weeks prior to the rural and remote experience	To elicit preservice teachers' reasons for wanting to participate in the rural and remote experience
Reflection	On the return journey from the rural and remote experience	To gain preservice teachers ' immediate reflections on their experience
Questionnaire	1 week after completion of rural and remote experience	To gain further understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions of the experience after time to share and reflect on their experience

The first source of data collected from the participants was a questionnaire sent via email several weeks prior to the program. The questionnaire provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to express their interest in participating in the Over the Hill program. Preservice teachers were required to articulate their reasons for wanting a rural and remote teaching experience. This allowed for data to be collected regarding the preservice teachers' professional and personal motives for involvement.

The second source of data was collected from preservice teachers on the bus during the journey home from the Over the Hill program. Preservice teachers audio-recorded their own individual reflections *(n=11)* on their rural experiences. This enabled the researchers to gather data on the preservice teachers' immediate reactions to the program.

One week later, a further questionnaire *(n=14)* was administered at a de-brief session designed to discuss the experiences and to link what had been learned to university course work. The questionnaire provided an opportunity for preservice teachers to give extended responses to questions about the positive aspects of the program, the value of the rural school immersion and the improvements that they believe would benefit future groups. The data were hand coded to permit the researchers to become familiar with the preservice teachers' responses (Creswell, 2009). The coding process allowed for the emerging themes to be noted.

Results and Discussion

Twenty one expressions of interest were received from preservice teachers that demonstrated their reasons for applying for the Over the Hill experience. Although there was some variation in their responses their enthusiasm for gaining broader experience that would assist them to "become a better teacher in the future" was evident in the majority of responses. Furthermore, it seemed some preservice teachers were keen to investigate whether teaching in a rural and remote community was a career option they would like to pursue in the future. A typical response that summarised the group noted:

> Currently I am considering teaching in a rural setting at the completion of my university degree; however I am apprehensive in committing to this decision before experiencing first hand the similarities and differences that a rural placement has to offer.

As well as viewing the Over the Hill program as providing options for future career opportunities, some preservice teachers were interested in gaining more teaching knowledge and practice. Participants viewed it as an opportunity to expand their professional development and gain further confidence for teaching. The following preservice teacher's reply was reflected in a number of the received expressions of interest.

> The experience would be a rewarding opportunity to further develop my teaching skills. As a preservice teacher I feel I should take on every opportunity that is available to be involved in classroom practice, so I can gain more confidence and experience, broadening my knowledge base. After I graduate I would like to teach in rural communities and this program enables me to sample 'country life'.

Overall, it seemed that all the participants who applied to undertake the Over the Hill program viewed it as a "valuable and authentic teaching and learning experience" that would position them well for future career choices and expand their knowledge of teaching in rural and remote settings.

All twenty-one preservice teachers were successful in their expressions of interest to participate in the Over the Hill program, however, seven withdrew citing varied reasons such as "change of plans for that week", "I have decided I can't leave my children", "I can't get the time away from my part-time job" "I have come down with the flu" and "I think I will attend next year instead as I have so many assignments due". As a result, twelve females and two males accompanied two academics on the six-day Over the Hill program.

Reflections of the Rural and Remote Experience

Following the six-day experience noted in Table 1, preservice teachers were collected in the morning from their various host families to commence their return journey. Overall impressions of the rural and remote experience, the positive and negative aspects, suggestions for improvement and the effect of this experience on decisions to teach in a rural and remote community were self-recorded on the bus on the return journey. At the time of recording little sharing and thus comparison of experiences had occurred. Eleven of the fourteen preservice teachers volunteered to share their experiences.

In every response, preservice teachers rated the overall experience as valuable and contributing to their understanding of life and work in a rural community. Preservice teachers noted the friendliness and supportive networks within the communities in which they spent time. This extended to the interactions between the teachers and parents.

> I like tuckshop day [children purchase lunches made by volunteer parents at the school], it was a big deal. On the Wednesday everyone had tuckshop and I thought that was pretty special. I would definitely, definitely come out here.

The welcome from the school community and the host family contributed to preservice teachers feeling comfortable in this environment. They noted the high level of trust in rural schools where classrooms were left unlocked and there were limited behaviour problems. For example,

> It has a completely different feel in the classrooms. The kids are really well adjusted. It's really quite strange to see students in classrooms unattended at lunch breaks and stuff with equipment everywhere and just leave the door open and walk out. There is a high level of trust in schools which is really lovely to see.

However, one *preservice teacher* who was placed in a very isolated area recommended that future programs place pairs or groups together so that "you kind of feel a bit more comfortable with what you are doing and don't get homesick too much".

The learning that the preservice teachers gained during their time in the primary rural classrooms was considered to be a valuable aspect of this experience. The preservice teachers were involved in a range of teaching experiences in the schools. Some acted more in the role of a teacher's aide, while others were asked to teach whole class lessons, take small groups and support students with special needs. It is acknowledged that the preservice teachers would participate in similar activities in urban settings. However, the rural experience allowed preservice teachers to learn how to manage and plan for composite classes or a class with eight different age groups. These opportunities are not usually available in urban teaching experiences. One preservice teacher also observed a LOTE (Languages other than English) lesson taught over the telephone. Again, this experience is unique to teaching in rural settings.

Preservice teachers' comments highlighted their realisation that there was a large amount of preparation, programming and planning that contributed to the successful organisation of teaching and learning experiences in these kinds of classrooms and schools. They acknowledged that this was not work that they had covered in their university course and they stressed the need for experiences that contributed to their knowledge about assessing and planning for different age groups within the one classroom.

> ...it is always going to be harder in a rural area. Teaching in such a small school is definitely a very, very difficult thing to do and I think you have to make that job work. You can't just be anybody sent out there. I am thankful that I have had that experience and I can be prepared because I do want to teach in a rural area.

The majority of preservice teachers considered that the experience had helped them to feel comfortable if they were transferred to a rural community, and some had decided that a rural teaching position was their preferred placement option.

Questionnaire Data

The final source of data, a questionnaire, was administered to preservice teachers one week after returning from the Over the Hill experience. Analysis of the data from this questionnaire revealed that preservice teachers remained extremely positive about their rural and remote experiences. A typical comment was "Loved the whole experience. Students were amazing". Also emerging from the questionnaire data was the preservice teachers' appreciation of the rural lifestyle, the people and the nature of the students. One preservice teacher noted that "The country and the people are so down to earth and friendly. The school I visited was laid back and the students were great"

As well as spending time in schools, preservice teachers valued the time spent in the wider community with their host families and undertaking the organised social functions. They

commented that this gave them greater insight into what it would be like to teach in a similar district from the perspective of the community members. A typical comment from one preservice teacher who noted, "The time allowed immersion, not just in the classroom, but also community-which gave an indication of life during country service." While another noted, "By staying with a parent from the school I was able to discuss the in's and out's of the school community from a parent's perspective as well as the students".

Another positive aspect of this experience for the preservice teachers was the small size of schools that facilitated informal professional discussions. Preservice teachers noted they found this beneficial. For example, one preservice teacher commented, "I absolutely loved the school visits and every lunch time the three teachers would discuss their lessons and students' progress, which was very positive."

Opportunities that would not normally be part of their urban teaching experiences were also appreciated by the preservice teachers. For example, several commented that the best aspects of participating in the Over the Hill program were "just seeing how the teacher prepares and teaches in a school with P-7 in one class" and "Observing wide-scale planning for Prep -7 that requires modifying each year (students from previous years also participated in lesson) puts single grade planning into perspective." However, one preservice teacher recognised that new teachers in rural and remote areas may struggle if they had no experience in multi-grade teaching and no experienced teacher to assist. This preservice teacher commented that "given both teachers (in the school) were new it was hard to see how they teach effectively with multi-age".

Conclusion

The Over the Hill program has helped to reduce the perceived social, cultural and professional isolation of teaching in a rural community for preservice teachers from an urban university in Queensland. The preservice teachers commented on the strong community support that was evident in each location visited. While the program reinforced the notion that preservice teachers would be teaching in a multigrade class, the program alleviated their concern of lack of support structures. Preservice teachers realised that, rather that being professionally isolated, the geographical isolation in these rural and remote settings at least, actually encouraged professional interactions to a level that they had not previously experienced in urban schools. Teachers worked together collaboratively and collegially in their school settings and had well organised opportunities for professional development and networking in the district and beyond.

While the small scale of this study which focused on a diminutive group of preservice teachers in one rural district is acknowledged, the investigation has highlighted two significant findings. First, student perceptions of teaching in rural and remote communities can be informed by a six-day rural and remote teaching experience. Second, when preservice teachers are immersed in a familiar context (primary school teaching) in an unfamiliar setting (rural and remote schools and communities) extensive professional learning can occur in a short period of time. Also confirmed by this study is that the nature of the Over the Hill experience which included staying with local families, being involved in community activities as well as days in the classroom contributed to the positive outcomes of the project.

In light of these findings, it is proposed that universities need to rethink how experiences such as the Over the Hill project can become a legitimate part of teaching experiences in

university programs. As a result of this study it is recommended that teacher education courses include options for preservice teachers to learn about teaching and living in rural and remote locations through units of study that include how to plan for and teach multi-age groups of students. A further recommendation is that such units include a six-day rural and remote experience that combines an immersion into rural schools with billet style accommodation in the local community. While staffing in rural and remote regions remains an issue, the findings from the Over the Hill project and the suggested recommendations provides one solution to educating and locating suitable and well prepared candidates for future Australian classrooms.

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About the Authors

Dr. Denise Beutel

Dr. Denise Beutel is a lecturer in education at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. Her research interests are teacher education, mentoring, teacher induction and middle years of schooling. Prior to commencing at QUT, Denise was a teacher with over twenty years experience teaching in secondary schools. Her doctoral studies were completed in 2006 and her thesis, "Teachers Understandings of Pedagogic Connectedness" interrogated the nature of teacher-student engagements in the middle years of schooling.

Dr. Lenore Adie

Lenore Adie is a lecturer with the Queensland University of Technology. Her research focuses on assessment and moderation processes as these contribute to supporting teachers' pedagogical practices and student learning. Lenore has worked as a primary school teacher and in administration positions in state and private schools within Queensland, Australia.

Suzanne Hudson
Suzanne Hudson has been involved in teaching and teacher education preparation for the past 29 years. Research interests include teacher induction, mentoring, community engagement and the middle years of schooling. Currently, Suzanne is the Academic Coordinator for the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology's Caboolture campus, which is located one hour north of Brisbane, Australia.

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