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Urban Pre-service Teachers' Conceptions of Teaching in Rural Communities

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Abstract: Encouraging quality teaching staff to apply for and accept teaching placements in rural and remote locations is an ongoing concern internationally. The value of different support mechanisms provided for pre-service teachers attending a rural and remote practicum[1] are investigated through theories of place and the school-community nexus. Qualitative data regarding the experiences of the pre-service teachers were collected through interviews and case study notes. This project adds to our understanding of practicum in rural areas by employing a conceptual understanding of place to propose how the experiences of a four-week practicum may contribute to urban pre-service teachers' conceptions of work and life in a rural community.

Introduction

It has been well documented that there is a crisis in rural and remote education particularly in terms of educational disadvantage and the retention rates of teachers (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Green, 2009; White et al, 2008; McConaghy, 2006; NCTAF, 2002; Top of the Class, 2007). These concerns are not new as Watson and Hatton's (1995) work more than a decade ago shows. Many of these issues have been related to the limited opportunity and training for urban pre-service teachers regarding the rural education context (Burton & Johnson, 2010; White et al. 2008; Lock, 2008; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Green and Letts (2007, p. 61) suggest that these issues can be attributed to the lack of recognition educational organisations give to the effect of geography on 'educational access and equity'.

Green and Letts (2007) identify a number of concepts relevant to teacher education and rural and remote practicums which focus on the importance of context when learning about pedagogy in a rural school. These include the notion of 'other', the relationship between space and subjectivity, the significance of culture in the development of identity, and rurality as a social construction. These authors note that while the significance of 'place' appears to be acknowledged in education policy, space appears to be a neglected concern. Space in this sense is viewed as a physical and mental construct that relates critically to notions of equity, privilege and power. While place is not specifically defined or elaborated on by the authors, it may be that place is addressed within curriculum and pedagogy as teachers routinely adjust programs to take in local knowledge. Green and Letts (2007) suggest that those involved in all levels of education need to think differently about what happens 'out there' [in the rural space], while recognising a conceptual relationship between place and space. In this paper we build on the idea of a conceptual relationship between place and space, to explore how understandings of rural space and a conceptual understanding of 'otherness', may be developed through participation in a rural practicum that purposefully works to immerse pre-service teachers within a rural 'place'.

For the urban pre-service teacher, the rural practicum is positioned as a different physical, social and cultural context (White, 2006; White & Reid, 2008; Wright & Osborne, 2007) that offers both challenges and rewards. Immediate barriers to participation in a rural practicum include the financial cost of accommodation and travel (Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2003; Ryan et al., 2009) as well as being away for a block period of time from part-time work, familial or personal commitments. In addition, pre-service teachers on a rural and remote practicum may experience factors that impact negatively such as: lack of contact with university staff; cost of contacting staff or other pre-service teachers if having trouble; limited on-site support if having difficulty with a supervising teacher; and the complexity of planning for multi-age classrooms (Lock, 2008; Sharplin, 2002, 2009). While many difficulties associated with a rural practicum have been identified, at the successful completion of a rural practicum pre-service teachers report benefits that include: learning skills in multi-age settings and gaining a broader understanding of curriculum; gaining an understanding of how a whole school operates as there is more opportunity to see the role of a small school principal; and closer contact with parents and other community members (Collins, 1999; Davie & Berlach, 2010; Roberts, 2005; Sharplin, 2002; White, 2006).

In Australia there have been a number of government reports which have focussed on how to prepare pre-service teachers for rural appointments given the perceived need for quality teachers in these areas, and the large numbers of teachers who commence their careers in rural schools. For example, *Top of the Class* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), an inquiry into teacher education, recommended that pre-service teachers should be involved in a practicum in rural and remote schools for a number of reasons. A recommendation of this report was the strengthening and extension of strategic partnerships between the university sector and professional and broader communities. Common to all of the reports into rural education is the recommendation that 'quality' teachers are appointed to work in rural schools. While desiring teachers with good teaching proficiencies is an understandable requirement for any location, the term 'quality' is vague and when expanded on in the literature often results in generic lists of desirable skills and practices. Eppley (2009) has argued that a standardised set of generic skills that define 'quality' teachers is insufficient for those teaching in rural communities and that teachers in rural schools must also understand the place in which they are working and the relationship of place to identity and also to learning.

This paper reports on a case study of a pilot project implemented by an urban university, which aimed to support pre-service teachers completing a rural or remote practicum to develop a deeper understanding of the 'places' in which they were teaching. The analysis draws on theories of place (Cresswell, 2004; Somerville & Rennie, 2012) as a way to explore the connection between the physical, social and cultural aspects of location and the construction of self as a teacher in these locations and space as the physical and mental constructs that students contend with during their practicum. Somerville and Rennie (2012, p. 1) have proposed that the "site of teacher education, and the first years of teacher learning at work, are critical for learning 'community'". This project explored those notions to determine the value of purposefully involving pre-service teachers in the social, cultural and physical aspects of a place, in order to progress their understandings of working, teaching and living in a rural space.

Background of the Project

For many urban pre-service teachers, a rural practicum presents as a foreign and yet an exciting landscape. For pre-service teachers at an urban university who elect to complete their four-week practicum block in a rural setting, they are learning to become and belong (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in a teaching profession, but in a place which is most often an

unfamiliar cultural and social context. In a teaching practicum, pre-service teachers can be positioned as peripheral to the professional community. Placing them in an unfamiliar rural setting also positions them as peripheral to the physical, social, and cultural norms of the wider community. It is proposed in this paper that using a framework of 'place' (Cresswell, 2004; Nespor, 2008; Somerville & Rennie, 2012) can support insights into how pre-service teachers' participation in a rural and remote practicum may contribute to a developing sense of professional identity, which includes understanding the relationship between university learning, school experiences and community values and norms.

'Place' has been conceptualised in this study as a bounded and interconnected physical, social and cultural space where each facet shapes and is shaped by the other (Nespor, 2008). Working in a rural school involves a relationship with the community that includes the physical locations as well as explicit and implicit norms and practicalities. In this way, 'place' is understood as related to the discursive construction of subjectivity, where "through the *practising* of place, the negotiating of intersecting trajectories; place [is] an arena where negotiation is forced upon us" (Massey, 2005, p.154 in Comber & Nixon, 2011). In their rural practicum, the pre-service teachers were positioned to negotiate the intersecting trajectories of urban and rural environments as well as the intersecting trajectories of their university learning and their experiences in a rural school.

We propose that this process of negotiation could be considered a 'ruralisation of the mind' as pre-service teachers are confronted with their urbanity and their stereotypical notions of rural life and communities. This idea has been adopted from the work of Ching and Creed (1997, in Corbett, 2009) who coined the term "urbanization of the mind" to describe the effect of a standardised and centralised curriculum on the learning of rural youths. It is also drawing on Green and Letts' (2007) call to re-think and re-imagine the rural 'other'. 'Ruralisation of the mind' is an idea that we are exploring in an attempt to describe the effect of understanding place on the pedagogic practices of pre-service teachers. Positioned in an unfamiliar rural school and community, pre-service teachers are learning about their profession and the nuances of teaching in a rural school with often multi-age classes, as well as life in small rural and remote communities. Teacher education and the first years of teaching are considered a critical time for learning 'community' and disrupting the entrenched assumptions of rurality that may interfere with the learning outcomes for students in these rural communities (Sommerville & Rennie, 2012).

The purpose of this project was to investigate a case of how pre-service teachers may come to understand the school-community nexus in a rural and remote setting during a 4 week practicum block. The design of the project was based on the assumption that a true understanding of place only occurs through hearing multiple stories of 'the place', and through self-construction of personal stories (Somerville, 2012). The results highlight the constitutive nature of rural and remote communities through the shaping and learning that occurred as the pre-service teachers were purposefully integrated into community. This purposeful integration of the students into the community is premised on the notion that "What we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 143). The discussion considers this shaping in terms of how the pre-service teachers came to understand and appreciate the parameters in which they were working and how this then shaped their developing professional identity.

In response to the issues of a rural and remote practicum highlighted in the research literature, this project collaborated with the local Education District Office, the local state and Catholic school principals, and the Isolated Country Parents Association (ICPA) to determine how understanding place can be supported through fundamental aspects of a practicum experience such as support for accommodation as well as through organised community involvement. The partnership also included enlisting schools and teachers who would commit at the beginning of the school year to accept the responsibility to supervise a fourth year pre-

service teacher during the four-week practicum block. In this way pre-service teachers could connect with their supervising teachers through email from the fourth week of the university semester and start to organise and plan a unit of work including the assessment tasks and criteria sheets to be implemented during their practicum (Weeks 10 - 13 of the semester). The development of this unit was supported through university tutorials. Contact with the class teacher via email ensured that the unit of work was aligned with the teachers' program and ways of working.

Arrangements to professionally and socially support students in this program also included the appointment of local University Liaison Academics (ULAs). The ULA is the vital link in the partnership between schools and the university. The ULA's role is to talk with school site coordinators and supervising teachers about the expectations of the university for pre-service teachers at different stages in their preparation, and to support pre-service teachers to successfully negotiate the juncture between university learning and classroom practice. A further requirement of the ULAs in this project was to support the pre-service teacher to experience the rural and remote community. Normally, pre-service teachers going on rural and remote practicum are contacted by phone or by email by an urban-based ULA and not visited in person.

To ascertain the success of these measures in supporting pre-service teachers to understand teaching in these rural communities, and to improve and inform future rural and remote placements, all participants: pre-service teachers, supervising teachers and ULAs were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their experiences in the rural and remote setting.

Research Design

Methodology

This research was designed as a case study to collect data on the pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching in a rural community as the result of a rural and remote practicum completed in 2010. A case study approach legitimises the participant perspectives allowing similar experiences to be viewed through multiple lenses (Simons, 2009). These narrative descriptions allow the richness and depth of an experience to be shared and actively interrogated for meanings and generalisations beyond the local context. The focus of this discussion is on the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the rural place, and the continuity or disruption of these discourses over the four week period. The analysis primarily draws on the pre-service teachers' interviews and is supported by comments made by the supervising teachers and ULAs.

Participants

The participants in this project were six pre-service teachers in their fourth and final year of study on their third (out of five) 4-week practicum; their supervising teachers (total of six) and two University Liaison Academics (ULAs). All six pre-service teachers volunteered to complete this practicum in a rural and remote location of central Queensland, Australia. The pre-service teachers were sent in pairs to three rural towns within the same remote region. The region is located approximately 1200km from the location of the urban university attended by the pre-service teachers. The distances between the three towns were approximately 115 kilometres, 180 kilometres and 235 kilometres. Each pair of pre-service teachers did not see each other during the four-week practicum.

Methods

Participant perspectives were sought on whether the program was successful in supporting pre-service teachers to think about the rural 'place' or setting in a different way. We were looking for evidence of the development of a 'ruralisation of the mind', or a reconceptualisation of the rural 'other' which may increase future orientation to teaching in rural and remote settings. Participants were involved in either a telephone interview, or face-to-face interviews between the pre-service teachers and researchers on their return to campus. These interviews all occurred during the month of June, 2010.

The interview questions were designed to gather data from participants on their opinions about the support provided during the four-week practicum; areas for improvement; and the value participants attributed to the experiences provided. This design was open-ended so that issues salient to the participants were allowed to emerge in the discussions. The interview questions were:

1. In your opinion, what were the positive aspects of this practicum for you?
2. How could this experience be improved to support pre-service teachers completing a practicum in a rural and remote location?
3. What role did the university liaison academic perform in this practicum?
4. After reflection, which area of your personal/professional learning underwent greatest growth? How and why did this occur?

A qualitative categorical analysis (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004) revealed descriptive categories of the different ways the pre-service teachers connected with the professional and local community. The pre-service teachers told stories of dissonance and disconnection woven into insightful learning experiences, an enjoyment of the difference, and an acknowledgement of becoming with possibilities for belonging to a teaching profession. The data illustrates how the various aspects of place may come together to support the learning of newcomers but that this experience is the beginning of developing a rurality of the mind, and is inadequate as a one-off experience.

Findings

The following section outlines the events and topics that were the focus of the pre-service teachers' oral reflections, with the perspectives of the supervising teachers and ULAs included as a form of triangulating the data and adding credibility to the findings. The data are discussed in the key themes of:

- Connecting with the profession
- Connecting with place through the profession
- Connecting with place through the community

The analysis showed the links that the pre-service teachers were making with the social, cultural and physical landscape of the community, and the at times simple actions that enabled these understandings to develop. Before this practicum, the pre-service teachers discussed their perceptions of rural locations as wide, open and peaceful spaces where there was little social activity and there was time for contemplation, and time to read a book while the sun set... these imaginings were soon disrupted. This practicum enabled the pre-service teachers to start to develop an appreciation of the richness as well as the hardships of life in a rural community, and to start to connect these understandings with their professional practice.

Connecting with the profession

Connecting with their supervising teachers through email before the practicum commenced enabled the pre-service teacher to gain information regarding their living arrangements as well as professional expectations. The unfamiliarity of the rural placement which included the urban pre-service teachers' preconceived notions of the rural, led to a heightened need on the part of the pre-service teacher to have a unit of work prepared before the start of the practicum. The planning was one way the pre-service teachers could enter this rural practicum with a degree of readiness and control over this aspect of their professional experience. This relationship was reliant on the supervising teacher being prepared to commence the professional mentoring of the pre-service teacher (through email feedback on the unit development) before the formalised practicum period. When this occurred, the professional guidance provided by the supervising teacher supported the pre-service teacher to shift between the intended curriculum as it is understood through the theoretical constructs introduced in university tutorials, and the enacted curriculum as it is adjusted for the diversity of place and individual student needs. This initial email communication enabled the pre-service teachers to work across the boundaries of university learning and school practice during the lead-in semester to this rural practicum experience.

The ULAs noted the benefits for both parties of this early connection and communication which they believed supported a successful transition into the school and classroom. For the supervising teachers, having pre-service teachers arrive with a prepared unit of work that complemented the teachers' semester planning, supported them to meet professional commitments such as reporting and moderation. Pre-service teachers (PST) commented that starting the practicum with a unit of work already prepared reduced the stress associated with the load of lesson preparation to the degree that they had experienced on previous practicum.

PST1: We got to do the unit before we got there so you had an idea, and so I'd already written my six lessons, and could modify, change them according to the class. So I had a lot of the work done already.

The pre-service teachers reported that this body of knowledge coupled with the constructive feedback and sharing of local knowledge from the supervising teachers gave them a confidence to take chances and extend their practice. While it is anticipated, that all supervising teachers provide this form of support regardless of their location, there were factors in this context that gave the pre-service teachers a confidence that they stated they had not previously experienced in other practicum.

It may be that the inclusive context established by the teachers and the school community provided the pre-service teachers with this increased confidence to extend their practice. The valuing of their contribution to the classroom was an important factor. Due to their location, teachers in rural and remote schools are not involved in the different programs that place pre-service teachers into classrooms for practical experiences outside of the practicum block, nor do they have access to the variety of professional development opportunities of their urban counterparts. The supervising teachers commented that they had enjoyed the collaborative sharing of ideas and planning in a context where often they are the only teacher for a particular year level. They noted the value for their own professional experience as they explained and justified to the pre-service teachers their way of organising and working in their classroom. One teacher stated: 'Experiences like these make you question and reflect on your teaching and make changes'. For example, one teacher commented how she learnt to incorporate more technology into her teaching from the pre-service teacher. One ULA provided confirmation that some of the ideas that the pre-service teachers introduced into the classrooms had been adopted as everyday practice of the supervising teachers after the practicum had ended.

Connecting with the profession was also facilitated through the ULA position though this varied according to the degree of professional and local involvement from the ULA. In one instance, the ULA organised meetings with the pre-service teachers on their own as well

as with the supervising teachers. Over the four-week practicum, these pre-service teachers developed a trust in their ULA as the following comments illustrate.

PST1: If there'd been a problem I would have gone straight to [the ULA].

PST2: [The ULA] met with us, and our teachers, and then the teachers left and she spoke to us, and said do you have any issues with your teachers, and gave us her home phone number, gave us her mobile, if we needed to contact her at any time, so...

PST1: and she gave me lots of ideas as well... 'maybe you should do this, maybe you should do this', so she was really good.

The supervising teachers also noted the valuable role that this ULA played in acting as a visible link between the school and university experiences.

Connecting with place through the profession

The teachers in each of the communities were instrumental in connecting the pre-service teachers to the local community. As 'short-term' residents, the teachers moved between their urban backgrounds and their rural work experience. In organising this practicum, the teachers were asked if they could assist the pre-service teachers to experience the local community. They did this by inviting the pre-service teachers to social and community events as well as made them feel included in the professional community of the school. This interaction was facilitated by welcome barbeques organised on the night on which the pre-service teachers arrived at each of the towns. Inclusion into the community involved practices such as introducing the pre-service teachers to staff generally, and specifically at staff meetings, and to the school community at school assemblies. This opened up opportunities for parents and students to introduce themselves and start conversations which enabled the pre-service teachers to start to connect with the local community. The pre-service teachers told how parents approached them and shared stories of living in the community and their future plans for the education of their children in towns where no secondary schools were located. The pre-service teachers developed an understanding of the issues faced by rural families and their children as they advanced through their schooling. They also learnt about the children's farm chores and riding horses before school, and came to understand their students a little better. They described the parents as caring about an education for their child the same as parents in urban places but with sometimes different pressures and issues to address.

While the pre-service teachers appreciated being placed in pairs at each school, being accommodated with the school staff in the provided staff housing was also considered to be important as this facilitated invitations from the teachers to dinners and other sporting and social activities within the community. In the four-week practicum, the pre-service teachers were inducted into a teachers' life within a rural and remote community, and they commented that it was the teachers who made their experience so enjoyable and worthwhile.

PST3: The teachers were what probably made our experience because there were houses that we lived next door to each other and we were such good friends by the end of it.

The supervising teachers also commented on the value of the positive relationships that were formed between themselves and the pre-service teachers over the four-week practicum. However, at times the resultant antagonism of living in such close quarters was also obvious to the pre-service teachers. While they acknowledged that staff rooms in urban schools can also be places of conflict they noted that at least you did not have to mix with colleagues over the weekend. Developing a sense of camaraderie amongst staff become important issues for school principals in these rural schools. There were simple events such as sharing food that supported this sense of community and acted to foster the pre-service teachers' appreciation of working in a rural school.

PST1: They'd always bring in home-made food. It was so good. Some of the teachers and the teacher aides would make food and bring it into the staffroom and everyone would get it. One day the principal made this massive batch of pumpkin soup, so we all had pumpkin soup.

Throughout the interviews of the pre-service teachers it became evident that it was the very small events like providing resources or the sharing of food that caused the pre-service teachers to reconsider the professional and local communities in which they were placed. In other words, these simple events were the impetus to deeper reflections about the value of community, and were a resource to overcoming challenges.

In the case reported in this paper, each of the principals was focal in organising and providing the pre-service teachers with teacher accommodation and transport, though these experiences were different in each location. School principals drove into 'town' to pick up the pre-service teachers from the airport and take them back to their location. In some accommodation pre-service teachers only made a contribution to electricity and groceries, while in others, they were required to pay for their accommodation. Financial support for living expenses was also provided to the pre-service teachers by each of the towns Isolated Children and Parents' Associations (ICPA) to help with living expenses including the increased cost of food. The amount of the donation varied in each location and responded to the costs incurred in each location. In one locality the local Shire Council also provided a grant to the pre-service teachers to support their expenses while on the practicum. These actions were not organised before the practicum and were unexpected by the pre-service teachers. They provided an insight into the generosity of the communities and the value that they placed on encouraging 'quality' teacher applicants to their communities. While the financial issues of this practicum were addressed, these were one-off actions but they do show the type of financial partnerships that could be brokered to financially support pre-service teachers to attend a rural and remote practicum.

Connecting with place through the community

Understanding the nuances of the local is an important teacher 'quality' when working in rural communities. In examining discourses of teacher quality in terms of rural education, Eppley (2009) came to the conclusion that the elements that constitute quality "is a matter awash in complexity" (p.7), and that quality was "context-dependent" (p.1). Our project found that experiences in the rural communities helped to consolidate the value and uniqueness of a rural and remote practicum for the urban pre-service teachers, and an appreciation for the rural knowledges and experiences that the children brought with them to the classroom. But the project also exposed the urbanised notions of 'normal' held by the pre-service teachers and the resultant discourses of deficit that surfaced.

In this pilot project, the appointment of the ULA role to a local community member who was also a registered teacher was a purposeful decision. Our intention was that the ULA would provide a link to the community. Unfortunately, for one pair of pre-service teachers, a local ULA was not able to be organised, and the pre-service teachers' experience of their community was limited in comparison with the other students' experiences. This pair of pre-service teachers tended to stay in their accommodation and did not venture out as much into the local community even when invited by the local teachers. In comparison, the other two pairs of pre-service teachers who were supported by a local ULA spoke with a deeper understanding of their community. For one of these pairs the ULA conversed with the pre-service teachers but did not socialise with them. The main role performed by this ULA from the pre-service teachers' perspective was to support them to organise their financial funding arrangements. The ULA noted that the pre-service teachers were confident and not in need of a great deal of support though she did attend staff meetings with them. The pre-service

teachers stated that because of the supportive nature of the entire school community, the ULA's role was superfluous for them.

The pre-service teachers who appeared to show a markedly changed perception of a rural community were the two whose ULA invited them into the community by attending events with them and inviting them to experience her 'place'. This ULA took the pre-service teachers to her property for the weekend, and on the last day of their practicum drove in from her property two and a half hours away to say goodbye. Visiting their ULA's property was a highlight for the two pre-service teachers and an insight into rural life.

PST2: Her husband spent a whole day just taking us around their property; 33000 acres they live on. Just took us around for the whole day; put lounges on the back of their ute [pick-up truck]; we all sat in the back while we drove around their property.

There were emus and broilgas and kangaroos running along beside us while we're sitting in the back. It was really good.

It is evident from this case study that ideally the ULA role requires a person who is willing to share personal insights into community as well as professional knowledge, and one who can mediate possible issues of conflict while maintaining harmonious community relationships well after the pre-service teachers complete their practicum. Certainly in this project the pre-service teachers' experiences of place were richer when the ULA was actively involved in professional and community negotiations.

Not surprisingly, cultural assumptions were challenged the more the pre-service teachers experienced the rural communities. Local race days and the local shows were being held around the district at the time of this practicum and the pre-service teachers described their enjoyment in attending these, with one of them becoming the school nominee for show-girl. In this role she had to learn facts about the local community and be interviewed by a panel as well as involving herself in representative events. We do not propose that all pre-service teachers take up offers to become show-girl nominees! However we did observe an increased understanding of the rural community through the intense coaching that this pre-service teacher received, and propose that learning about community can be facilitated through the stories of past, present and future that locals tell of their place.

Stories that the pre-service teachers told on their return from their rural practicum also revealed the unrealistic expectations and the stereotypical discourses of rurality of the urban pre-service teachers. For example, one pre-service teacher commented how surprised she was to find how 'civilised' the town was and how many activities there were to do.

PST5: I took four books because I was expecting that in the afternoons, once I'd done my work, I'd sit out and read a book on the doorstep and watch the sunset...

Instead the pre-service teachers found that they were kept very busy with all of the social and sporting activities available in their communities.

A challenging aspect of life in a small rural town for the pre-service teachers was the lack of privacy. For example, one of the pre-service teachers related the following incident.

PST1: One of the girls I saw, she was telling all her friends [at school on Monday], 'I saw [pre-service teacher] on the weekend and her hair was really messy, like she just got out of bed'. And I had literally just got out of bed.

Adjusting to the social experience of being constantly in view of the community was confounded when cultural expectations were also being challenged. The students were surprised to find that shops closed on a Sunday, and that grocery items were only delivered to shops once a week, or that if something happened to the local baker, then there was nobody to take his place and supply ended.

PST5: like the bakery wasn't even open on a Sunday.

PST3: Like the baker, we had a guy who cut his finger off one day then had a heart attack the next...So we didn't have a baker for about a week...

PST4: ...we had no bread

PST3: ...literally, the whole town had no bread...we were really tired and we knew why 'cause we didn't have our carbs

PST4: Yeah, I hadn't had fibre in days and I was grumpy and I was so hungry. But it was just so interesting that, there was just no bread anywhere.

PST3: And 'cause the truck that stocks the local store only comes in once a week, so it hadn't come in.

PST4: It was limited. All the bread would go out like that on a Monday, so, the truck comes on a Tuesday afternoon, and by like Thursday afternoon you wouldn't get anymore bread.

In this conversation, the pre-service teachers view the rural community in a discourse of deficit, taking for granted their urban notions of consumerism. There is little evidence of empathy or reflexivity about this experience. In this instance the rural community was viewed as lacking in the necessities of daily living. The students told of an emotional and physical reaction to the lack of what they considered to be basic provisions. Travelling to other locations sixty to eighty kilometres away to purchase groceries was also a new experience for the urban pre-service teachers. Sights such as shopping trolleys full of bread and other groceries being packed into large eskies (An insulated portable container for keeping food cold), common in rural communities that service those living on remote properties was a sight that astonished these urban pre-service teachers whose experiences were bounded by easily accessible supermarkets and convenience stores, online shopping and home delivery.

Discussion

An inherent problem with interviews and thus analysis of these types of stories is the unproblematic ideals of rural life and community that permeate, especially from a four week period when others are going out of their way to be welcoming. Yet while the pre-service teachers' conversations involved dinner parties and race days, their discussions also moved beyond these surface events to show an awareness of the potential problems that living in rural communities can present for themselves and for the community, such as the distances needed to travel, the lack of readily available supplies, access to education as students progress through their schooling, the lack of employment opportunities, the lack of anonymity, and the issues involved in working, living and socialising with the same people. They also noted the differences in lifestyles that entailed different responsibilities for the young people, and the different types of entertainment. The issue that needs to be addressed in higher education institutes that are preparing teachers must move pre-service teachers beyond these binary discourses of deficit and idyllic notions of rural life.

In preparing to work in a rural community, pre-service teachers must discard notions of deficit and be prepared to understand the rich local knowledge, and how this connects to and contributes to global understandings. The lack of bread may seem minor but it was not an insignificant event in illustrating the pre-service teachers' understandings of this rural community. Students need opportunities to explore these events, to understand the connection between place and identity as this relates to teaching and learning in a rural school. The rural four-week practicum block is an opportunity to start examining and disrupting idyllic and stereotypical discourses of the rural, preparing 'quality' pre-service teachers to work in these communities, but it is insufficient on its own. The four-week practicum is positioned as an introduction to the "specifics of the goings-on in rural towns that actually show what makes and sustains a community" (Hogg, 2007). What is needed in higher education are opportunities to examine these rural literacies – the rural 'place' and 'space', to share experiences of the rural and to hear other quite different rural experiences, and to develop understandings in relationship with their own urban literacies.

Experiencing a rural and remote practicum to some extent changed the pre-service teachers' views of life in a rural community and work as a teacher in a rural school. While deficit views of the rural persisted (for example, the bakery story), there were other experiences that caused the pre-service teachers to consider both the professional and personal advantages of at least their practicum experience in a rural community. After managing a multi-age class, the pre-service teachers expressed a greater confidence in their ability to teach a diverse range of students in a variety of contexts. The pre-service teachers were able to contribute positively to the professional community as well as gain benefit from the community as a result of a reflexive relationship and there was evidence of reciprocal learning between the pre-service teachers and their supervising teachers.

The experience also provided an insight for the pre-service teachers into their own adaptability and the ease with which they were able to fit into a new community and environment. For example, one pre-service teacher who was still living at home and had never needed to do her personal laundry, commented on how independent she had become and how much this experience had increased her confidence in her ability to meet different challenges. While all of the pre-service teachers found the practicum a valuable learning experience of work and life in a rural community, and some were aiming to teach in a rural community, others were still tentative of leaving their familiar urban environment but felt that if they were offered such a placement, they would do so with a reconceptualised notion of the rural community.

As a result of this project, we also want to reconsider the positioning of the ULA in a rural practicum. The ULA acts as the link between university knowledge and processes and the school practicum experience. This project showed that a ULA who is local to the community may also be influential in bridging the gap between the students' urban mindsets and a 'ruralisation of the mind'. In the project, the one ULA who extended her role beyond the professional to being a conduit to the rural community provided her pre-service teachers with embodied experiences (Somerville, 2012) of place to become learners of the community. Being positioned as a broker to the local community as well as the professional community, added a degree of complexity to this role which was navigated successfully by one ULA but not as successfully by another. The multidimensional role of the ULA as insider, critic, broker, translator, and trouble-shooter requires skilful navigation as the ULA constructs place for the pre-service teachers while being a part of that construction. Indications for this project are that the ULA is a far more powerful role than we anticipated and that this role requires further investigation.

Conclusion

It is highly improbable that a deep sense of place can develop in a four-week practicum; rather as Somerville and Rennie (2012) stress, it is important that higher education is a site where pre-service teachers start to learn "about the communities of knowledge, and practice within which the learners in their classes are located" (p. 13). In this paper we contend that by purposefully connecting pre-service teachers with the rural community we are opening up opportunities whereby the urban discourses of rurality are disrupted. When rural practicums are purposefully organised to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to experience a community and to start developing their own embodied place stories, then spaces are afforded to disrupt and reconsider previously held discourses of rural living and teaching in such a community.

Gaining an understanding of place supports pre-service teachers to make links between generic curriculum documents and local contexts. The pre-service teachers need to be immersed in the community and have time to reflect on their experiences so that they can start to imagine new possibilities for themselves as well as new possibilities for connecting

curriculum to local contexts wherever they may teach. Through the complex interplay of a diverse range of factors such as funding, university course work, a rural practicum, opportunities to socialise with staff and with the community, and conversations with parents, urban pre-service teachers can start to connect with place, reconceptualising and repositioning the rural community as a place where they can contribute to the learning of their students. This case study has provided evidence of how opportunities to hear and participate in local stories can support pre-service teachers to start to develop an embodied understanding of place. But these experiences will likely remain superficial unless students are purposefully involved in reflecting and adding to these experiences through engagement with theory and hearing other experiences of different places.

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