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Preparing the Australian Early Childhood Workforce for Rural and Remote Settings: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: This article presents the findings of a literature review of research on teacher preparation for rural settings. In the past there has been little or no preparation of teachers for rural teaching, with the emphasis placed on supporting beginning teachers once they commenced (Baills, Bell, Greensill & Wilcox, 2002; Howe, 2006); now there is a strong movement to prepare preservice teachers adequately before their first teaching appointment. However, what has become clear is that the focus of research has been predominantly on primary and secondary education. In our search we have not been able to identify a substantial body of literature about the preparation of early childhood educators for rural practice. The discussion considers the relevance of the findings for the early childhood sector, exploring possibilities for future research both in early childhood settings and in teacher education in general in light of government agendas and policy initiatives.

Introduction

The Council of Australian Government's (COAG, 2009) productivity agenda is underpinned by a firm commitment to education, with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) receiving specific attention to improve the quality of programs and advance education in the pre-primary years. The recent agenda has seen Australia-wide policy developed. Initiatives such as the National Quality Agenda drive the process with the implementation of a birth to five years curriculum framework, a set of national quality standards, and a process for replacing both State children services regulations and the current Australian accreditation system.

This agenda has ramifications for the ECEC workforce; for example, the recently released National Quality Framework includes a mandate for ECEC educational qualifications; that is, by 2013, all staff working directly with children require a minimum Certificate III in Children's Services, and all childcare programs requiring a degree trained teacher. The federal government recognised the importance of training through its \$32.4M budget commitment for the ECEC reform agenda (Press Release, 10 May 2011). In addition, the national ECEC field in Australia is experiencing continuous growth and dramatic change possibilities, as evidenced by the Labour Force Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), the ABS Survey of Education and Work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) and DEEWR trend data to 2010. The data suggests reasons for the growth include demographic transformations in work and family patterns, national and state initiatives, and global research findings that further support the importance of providing high quality ECEC programs with an underpinning rationale that this involves higher staff-child ratios. Furthermore, of those currently employed to work directly with young children: 43% have no

post-school qualifications; 29% have Certificates III/IV; and, 16% a Diploma/Advanced Diploma. In ECEC management positions, only 69% hold a Diploma or Advanced Diploma. Only 6.3% of ‘educators’ (staff working directly with children) and 3.3% of staff management positions have a bachelor degree (mostly a three-year qualification, not four years). Across all other occupations, the degree holding average is 17.8%. Of further interest, growth in ECEC staff is projected to be at rates nearly double other occupations for the next five years, with a growth rate of over 50% in 10 years. The current vacancy level for ECEC staff is high with the proportion of staff leaving the occupation (and needing to be replaced) at 15.7% annually, compared to 13.1% average for all other occupations.

A ‘skilling-up’ and ‘up-skilling’ of ECEC educators is of national importance now more than ever, with perhaps new qualifications being required that differ quantitatively and qualitatively from traditional studies. As teacher educators, we are interested in the attraction, retention and up-skilling of the ECEC workforce in rural and/or remote locations in Australia. However, while a plethora of research exists about the nature of quality ECEC programs, there is sparse research about the specific education and training strengths, needs, interests and opportunities of early childhood educators in rural and/or remote locations, particularly untrained staff and staff who require further qualifications.

A decade ago, the MCEETYA Task Force (2001) advised that the diversity of rural and remote locations needing quality education services requires a re-examination of the approaches to education and training. This article presents the findings of a literature review, which sought to uncover research around the approaches to initial and/or ongoing professional learning of ECEC educators in and for rural and remote settings. The literature search was limited to items published between 2005 and 2010, but as it became evident that a lot of worthwhile research on rural education had been carried out in the late 1990s and between 2000 and 2005, some papers were collected outside the original timeframe. Search terms entered were varied (especially when looking for “attributes”), but in the main “teach*” together with “rural” produced a substantial collection of research representing the most up-to-date information about what has been successful (or otherwise) in preparing teachers to work beyond the large population centres and thinking about future directions. The research question guiding the examination of the relevant literature was: How are early childhood educators prepared to work with children, families and communities in rural and/or remote settings in Australia? The following provides a summary of the literature, organised into several sections:

- Experiences of teachers working in rural or remote locations
- ‘Attributes’ for successfully working/living in rural settings
- Preparation of preservice teachers for teaching and living in rural or remote communities
- Ongoing Professional learning

Experiences of Teachers Working in Rural and Remote Locations

Much has been written about the issues related to rural education. Most prevalent are reports and discussions about teacher shortage in ‘the bush’, attraction and retention of teachers and ways of maintaining professional learning in relatively isolated communities. Information of both a positive and negative kind has been circulated about teaching in rural locations. On the positive end of the scale there are reports of exciting new technology projects, with satellites providing a new level of connectivity (Towers & Hutchinson, 2010) and of “cybercells” being trialled in Western Australia to “enrich the academic and social wellbeing of rural community members” (Broadley and Trinidad, 2008). On the negative side

are revelations of teacher shortages – in Western Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2006), for example, – that imply rural schools are not an attractive option for most teachers. Overseas-trained teachers have sometimes been lured to take up positions in hard-to-staff locations (Sharplin, 2009), as a last resort, to staff schools. Rural towns are not always attractive places for teachers, according to this description:

This particular community was also one of Queensland's lowest socio-economic areas. Many of the students arrived at school unwashed and unfed; some came from homes with no running water or electricity. (McBride, 2007, p.46)

McBride's paper explained that the work was difficult because children living in poverty are generally not motivated to learn. Other issues can include a lack of resources with teachers in rural schools sometimes unable to access services which would help them cater for the needs of their students, such as professional support for children with behavioural problems (Fields, 2009); attracting highly qualified staff, or gaining funding for them (Ireland, 2007).

Fields' (2009) research was a comparative study of rural and urban schools and included the advantages of small schools as well as the disadvantages:

Advantages include smaller class sizes, increased school safety and greater participation in extra-curricular activities. Teachers in small schools tend to be more satisfied with their jobs, have less absenteeism and take more responsibility for ensuring that students are successful in school. Students in smaller schools are reportedly no worse off in respect to academic achievement than their counterparts in larger schools. Perhaps more significantly for the study reported here, closer and more positive relations are thought to be developed between students and school staff in smaller schools and that this leads to students feeling more connected to the school community and less alienated (p.12).

Hiatt's (2000) account of a practicum at a small school in central NSW supports this view of country schools having the potential of being vibrant learning communities. Furthermore, Duffy's (2000) reflection on a practicum as part of her Bachelor of Early Childhood Education demonstrates that the fears preservice teachers often have about going to the country are surprisingly unfounded.

My initial meeting with the CSA I was to be working with suddenly put all my fears and apprehensions at ease. ... I suddenly saw my placement as being a pleasant experience (p.56).

Not only were Duffy's fears dispelled, she had the opportunity to see how hard children's services officers worked to cover the needs of a large area, and she developed genuine respect for the professionals in her field during her placement. Further research literature provides different perspectives on the rural experience for teachers – especially beginning teachers. Down and Woollorton (2004) reveal the dilemmas experienced by some of the students they had taught at university because their practice – critical reflective practice – did not match the expectations of the local education community. Old-style approaches to teaching and learning can persist in schools distant from education centres, and new staff, with new ideas, suffered in these environments. Miller, Paterson and Graham (2006) noted the stress experienced by young teachers who were thrust – too soon – into leadership positions. Because of staff shortages, and because of the high turn-over rate of teachers, many beginning or relatively inexperienced teachers in rural schools are asked to take on roles for which they have had no preparation. There has been a great reliance on mentoring and professional development programs in leadership to address such issues.

Another perceived difficulty is exposed in Halsey (2006) related to living in small country communities - the constant scrutiny of the community. Halsey describes the challenge of more vulnerable younger teachers, and making mistakes, it can be hard to “recover” and

develop the sense of dignity needed to progress to more effective practice and being considered a professional. Furthermore, Halsey found that teachers' personal lives could conflict, uncomfortably, with their professional lives, so that a "spatial self-help map" (p.491) becomes essential to separate the different spheres in which they operate, because small towns can be "complex and challenging places" (p.490). As Hasley defines:

The spatial map is intended as a conceptual tool for teachers to help them locate, monitor and continuously adjust their relationship dynamics in a rural or remote context, so that they can optimise their effectiveness in terms of pedagogy, contribute towards building social capital, and gain a sense of personal satisfaction from living and working in a country location. (p. 492)

Spatial mapping is a way of navigating living, being and working in small rural and remote spaces and places, to move beyond unvaried, uncontested and non-culturally determined definitions of rurality and remoteness. Hasley's conceptual model provides teachers with the tool to frame, monitor, manage interactions and locate one's self spatially. Like Hasley, Sharplin (2009) explored moving beyond uni-dimensional findings to explore the complex interaction of factors that contribute to individual teachers developing vastly different perceptions of their experience and environments. These multiple environments were identified as the socio-cultural community of rural Australia, the geographic location, the organisation, the workplace and a specific work role, while renegotiating familial and social relationships. The conceptual work undertaken by Sharplin offers a framework for reconciling conflicting findings relating to the relative significance of workplace and community influences on rural teacher retention:

By understanding the multiple environments that impact on rural and remote teachers, the interface between work and non-work life environments and the protective and risk factors associated with each environment, it is possible to manipulate these factors to enhance the quality of worklife of all teachers newly appointed to rural and remote schools. (p. 212)

Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock and Hastings (2008) argue, too, that "there may be ways for rural social space to be rethought" (p. 5) and they believe that:

... a *deficit* model of rural schooling [is] promoted in the public consciousness through the official naming of the rural as problematic, both by itinerant teachers stopping over to advance their own careers and the official naming of rural schools as difficult-to-staff (Roberts, 2005). The fear of the "Outback", the myth of the loneliness of rural living, of the slow-talking, slow-witted redneck, of snakes and dirt roads and dust – the fear of the wide brown land beyond the mountains – is real in the Australian consciousness. Australians safe in the comfort of the city have learnt to wake in fright through our songs and stories, our movies and media accounts. These paint pictures of drought and decline, of the failure of rural schools to achieve educational outcomes comparable to those of city schools, of Aboriginal students failing to thrive in the schools we have provided, and of low achievement, poor attendance, inadequate subject offerings, and Indigenous communities ravaged by alcoholism and abuse. Yet, as we argue here, these are representations. They are not truth, and they are most certainly not the whole truth. (p.3)

Through an ongoing longitudinal study employing various quantitative and qualitative methods, the researchers continue to study a number of schools which have high rates of staff retention and quality student outcomes in the view of their local communities. Findings to date uncover successful teachers' counter-stories and contradictions of working and living in rural social space. The goal of the research is to turn around negative perceptions of rural Australia and to provide successful university interventions aimed at promoting rural teaching and rural-regional sustainability both at individual, community and profession levels.

In summary, new approaches, which move away from a deficit model and negative perceptions of rural Australia, such as ‘place pedagogy’ (Somerville, 2007) and ‘rural social space’ (Lock, Reid, Green, Hastings, Cooper & White, 2009), where attention is focused on perceptions of places and how space is utilised by certain groups, are becoming more prevalent within the literature. These perspectives and understandings challenge us to consider a more contemporary view of rural teaching and assist us to rethink implications for teacher training. They offer us the opportunity to consider space and place as culturally complex and multiply constructed within which behaviours are enacted by social groups. These concepts are revisited later in the article. The following section examines the notion of suitable attributes or characteristics deemed valuable for teachers working in rural or remote locations.

‘Attributes’ for Successfully Teaching and Living in Rural Settings

The literature clearly positions working in rural or remote locations as presenting different challenges for teachers, however, the attributes teachers need to practice successfully in rural areas and meet community expectations is a topic that has not been at the forefront of discussion in the literature. A search of databases and research repositories unearthed a small set of papers discussing attributes in relation to community expectations. These were documented as teachers needing to be enthusiastic, professional in their conduct, have the ability to engage with the community, and knowledgeable of both teaching and working and living in rural contexts. Sentiments such as this illustrate the thinking that specific attributes are required for rural teaching, however, what these attributes actually entail is often illusive. Hudson and Hudson (2008) examined preservice teachers' attitudes for teaching in rural schools. Their focus was on changing attitudes during a rural practicum, and they consider the preparation of teachers for rural service more widely. They question the recommendation put forward by Collins (1999) that “candidates for rural teaching placements need to come with personal characteristics, rural backgrounds, or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas” (cited in Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p.69). As a way forward Hudson and Hudson (2008) present attributes as side issues in their article cautioning against the difficulty of determining personal characteristics and the limiting effect this would have on teacher selection. Their position is not to look for teaching candidates with special qualities, or with particular experience in rural living (as others have done), but to concentrate on all preservice teachers being prepared to take on rural teaching. They propose a broadening of the educational experiences for preservice teachers in an attempt to provide a wider pool of suitably experienced teachers for rural settings. The call is for universities to be proactive in introducing rural education within their teacher training courses (Hudson & Hudson, 2008).

Approaching the topic of ‘attributes’ at a more theoretical level, Reid, Green, White, Cooper, Lock and Hastings (2008) discuss “social capital”, alongside “educational capital” and “cultural capital”:

We are asking about the sorts of attributes and capacities that teachers need to have if they are to contribute in this way, as more often than not, “newcomers” to rural places – about the forms of capital they need to be able to invest to produce a return on their teaching in a rural place. We are working with the hypothesis that teacher education needs to produce a teacher with certain forms of *social* capital, as well as the symbolic educational and cultural capital that is their warrant to be there. (p.4)

This research team developed a particular interest in “rural social space” and how this might be incorporated, meaningfully, in future teacher education.

Boylan (2010) is not so much interested in determining ‘attributes’, or characteristics or capacities, as they are sometimes referred to, but he has researched thoroughly what a good program of preparation might include. Touching on knowledge and skills, his six “elements” seem closely associated with the concept of attributes. The third element serves well as an example:

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. (p. 5)

The next section of this article presents findings regarding relevant research that has explored how training courses have addressed the preparation of preservice teachers for rural and remote settings in Australia.

Preparation of Preservice Teachers for Teaching and Living in Rural or Remote Communities

Boylan (2010) presents a comprehensive summary of past practices and an exposition of the present situation in teacher education, placing particular emphasis on New South Wales. Boylan thought decades of government reports, reviews and inquiries, collectively, were an indication that “special attention” was needed to prepare teachers to work in rural schools. A sentiment shared by Auh and Pegg (2009) who determine ‘intervention’ in both the pre-service and in-service contexts as effective for improving rural education. This ‘intervention’ in relation to teacher training is seen as developing preservice teacher understandings of rural schools and rural life.

Research about preparing teachers for rural appointments carried out by Lock (2008) in Western Australia, reported what might be included in the preparation of students for rural practice:

- The development of appropriate teaching/ learning strategies
- Characteristics of students in rural/remote schools
- Managing student behaviour
- Teaching in multi-age classrooms
- Support provided for teachers in rural/remote locations: e.g. District Office
- Staff-student relationships in school
- Staff-student relationships outside school
- Community expectations of the school
- The role of the school in the community
- General operation of rural/remote schools
- Staff-staff relationships in school
- Staff-staff relationships outside school

Parent-student relationships
School expectations of teachers
Staff-parent relationships in school
Staff-parent relationships outside school
School resources
Community expectations of teachers outside school hours
Acceptance by the community
Participation in community activities (sport, clubs, etc)
Attitudes and values of people who live in rural/remote communities
Rural/remote lifestyle
Development of own living skills
(adapted from a table, p.27)

Lock felt that more work had to be done before there could be certainty about the content of a program specifically targeting rural education.

The literature indicates that there are a few explorations for new approaches to rural teacher education. Somerville (2007) experimented with “place pedagogy” as a post-graduate student undertook an extended internship at a school in Moree, NSW. This form of authentic learning sprung from the idea that “learning place and forming community” (p. 1) are part of preparation for rural service, “especially in the context of culturally and environmentally challenging places” (p. 1). Somerville showed interest in developing this approach more widely.

Lock, Reid, Green, Hastings, Cooper and White (2009), reporting on the first set of data collected from a study of three states, presents the preliminary conclusion that pre-service education should enable students to understand the concept of rural social space. In an earlier paper by the same research team (Lock, Green, Reid, Cooper, White & Hastings, 2008), the point was made that it was time to go beyond dominant past approaches to rural education, gather together all the good ideas about improving rural teacher education, show what was working and what was not, and develop a pathway for national development. Analysing the literature, Boylan (2010) compiled a list of things that had been recommended a rural teacher education program should include; he then examined the course outlines provided at twelve universities to see if these components were evident. In short, there was no clear indication that any of the recommendations had been implemented: only one institution had a compulsory subject about rural education; three institutions offered something as an elective, however, doing a practicum in a rural location was optional at all institutions. Apart from showing that little, if any progress had been made to strengthen teacher education for rural schools over a time frame of thirty years, Boylan proposed that coursework be developed to prepare preservice teachers for rural practice.

There is evidence that a range of initiatives have been trialled to improve preservice teachers’ capacity to confidently take up positions in rural and remote locations; some of which are outlined in the following section.

Initiatives to Give Students Teaching Experience in Rural Locations

Nelligan’s (2006) paper describes an eight-week rural practicum that students at Edith Cowan University undertook at the end of their training; as many teachers begin their practice in the country the practicum was intended to be a direct preparation for their first appointment. Weekly tutorials were conducted, online, as a way of supporting students during their practice teaching round. As a rural practicum can be a rather expensive component of teacher education, some institutions have devised ways of making it more affordable. Lock

(2007; 2008) describes and evaluates a scheme whereby the West Australian Department of Education, together with the Chamber of Minerals and Energy, paid students' living expenses and travel costs; King relates the experience of the University of Southern Queensland where financial support for students to have a rural practicum was given by local government councils (King, 2006). Similar alternative schemes, which were less expensive, have also been created: Hudson and Millwater (2009) provided a six-day tour for their preservice university students, during which they visited several outback towns and schools; Sharplin (2010), at the University of Western Australia, carried out a comparable round of school visits, considered to be a substitute for a rural practicum; White's (2006) multi-faceted program included a two-day visit to a country school. It could well be that some city-based universities have responded to criticism that they were doing little to stimulate teacher education for rural practice (White, Green Reid, Lock, Hastings & Cooper, 2008) and that things could, finally, be changing: for example, Queensland University of Technology academics keenly suggested the introduction of a rural practicum to teacher education courses, everywhere (Hudson & Hudson, 2008).

Halsey (2009) conducted a survey of pre-service students to gauge the cost of professional experience in rural and remote settings. From the 217 responses received from 19 teacher education providers, Halsey claims that:

For \$10 million annually, departments of education—governments—could become partners with 10,000 pre-service teachers in renewing Australia's rural teaching workforce needs each year. If this opportunity were taken up, something very significant about improving the attraction and retention of teachers for rural and remote schools would be ignited (p.150).

State and federal governments supported an initiative in the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia for early childhood education students to engage in off-campus studies at Murdoch University (Price & Jackson, 2009). Preservice teachers could work and live in their local community whilst completing their qualifications. The students received mentoring support from local teachers, who were paid.

The Ballarat campus of the Australian Catholic University set up a course whereby geographically dispersed students could work in a school in their local area, take part in on-campus intensive study and engage in online learning (Ryan, Jones, Buchanan, Morris, Nuttall, & Smith, 2009). The program evaluation showed that there were several impediments to the success of the initiative: online learning is not always easy; Internet connections are not always reliable; and setting up suitable partnerships with schools was a challenging task. A similar program in New Zealand, combining work, intensive schools and online learning (Yates, 2007) was evaluated as being successful.

At the University of New England some students in the fourth year of training took on an internship in a rural school and, simultaneously, carried out an action research project (Maxwell, Reid, McLoughlin, Clarke & Nicholls, 2002). They stayed connected as a class with online communication. The move to set up action research projects focused on professional practice, university knowledge and workplace realities in the final year of study was assessed as valuable for student learning, and, after a succession of 'pilots', the new program has been regarded as ready to be undertaken by full cohorts of students.

What is evident in the literature is the trialling of innovative approaches to provide authentic teaching experiences for student teachers in rural and remote locations. The next section focuses on actual course offerings and how understandings of rural education are embedded within courses.

Conventional Teacher Education Programs with Rural Education Embedded

The University of Southern Queensland has had various programs to give their students a level of preparation for rural service (Baills, et al., 2002): participation in an Isolated Children's Project is one of several mentioned in *Bridging the gap between beginning teachers and isolated/rural communities* (2002). The efforts of the university to improve teacher education extend to the offering of a unit of study entitled "Teaching in Small Rural Communities", but as the authors concede, more needs to be done to meet community expectations.

The practice of preparing preservice teachers to work in multi-grade classrooms, a feature common to many rural schools (Page, 2006), is a unit of study offered at Charles Sturt University as a way of better equipping graduates for teaching in rural settings. At the University of Western Sydney a special unit of study was created to support the government initiative "Beyond the Line", which sought to attract city-trained teachers to seek employment in country schools: Gregson and colleagues explained the idea was that "students could explore theoretical issues of rural education before experiencing the reality". The program included visits to country locations to observe "education in the bush" (Gregson, Waters & Gruppetta, 2006).

Hughes and Moriarty (2006) describe a program in early childhood education where nineteen school leavers from the country were taken to a large education centre for five weeks to attend lectures (on a limited basis) and visit "relevant educational sites" so they could judge for themselves if they would be prepared to leave their homes, temporarily, to study.

The prevalence of these initiatives points to the "importance of connecting learning to the student and their background" (p.48), or so-called "place-based pedagogy". Reid, an academic at Charles Sturt University, together with White, of Deakin University, argue that this approach should be more widespread: "we claim that consideration and consciousness of place are important for all teacher education curricula, not merely that on offer in rural and regional centres" (White & Reid, 2008). The research discussed in this section illustrates attempts by teacher training institutions to make connections between the physical reality of teaching and the understanding of the place where this may occur.

Professional Learning

Issues related to teaching in rural and remote communities are not confined to preparation of students, they include matters such as ongoing professional learning (e.g. Duncan-Howell, 2010; Hardre, 2009; Mirtschin, 2009; Reading, 2009; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Early childhood teacher retention and professional satisfaction is closely related to the level of support and mentorship they receive; yet, research investigating the field of ECEC internationally has found that opportunities to participate in in-service training and professional learning are unequal, and staff with the lowest levels of initial training tend to have the least access (OECD, 2001). Professional learning for rural and/or remote educators is often restricted due to the lack of offerings within the local area, the cost of travelling to a session and the lack of qualified substitution staff (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2010; Waniganayake & Nolan, 2005).

Scholars such as Broadley, Boyd and Terry (2009) recognise the need to enhance the skills of rural teaching professionals and encourage teachers in small communities to join collegial networks. Although equitable access for teachers in rural and remote areas is a continuing issue, there remains a lack of data on the quality and quantity of how much support and guidance is required. Relevant research highlights that focused recruitment and

skill development are being used by some childcare centres to reduce staff turnover. For example, Bretherton (2010) reports on four ECEC services, however, it is not clear whether such strategies can be replicated throughout the sector, particularly in rural and/or remote locations. Bretherton recommends that the current policy environment offers scope for the sector to move towards a path of skill growth.

What is clear is that professional learning opportunities on offer to early childhood education and care staff are adhoc, made even more problematic when the complexities of rural and remotely located staff are considered.

Discussion and Implications for ECEC Teacher Preparation

The following discussion considers the related literature and relevance of the findings for the early childhood sector, to explore possibilities for policy development, future research and professional learning, in both early childhood settings, prior to formal schooling, and in early childhood teacher education. To help guide the way forward we pose questions for consideration.

Feeling under prepared or taking up a position only to experience unexpected difficulties due to a lack of training is something that the early childhood education and care field can ill afford to let happen with widespread staffing issues across the sector, not just in rural or remote settings. It is recognised that the ECEC workforce needs to expand and skill-up and up-skill to meet the government reforms within the early childhood sector (Productivity Commission, 2011). Adequately preparing the workforce to be confident and comfortable teaching in rural and remote early childhood settings will need to be one goal within this wider agenda.

Considerations of 'place pedagogy' (Somerville, 2007) and 'rural social space' (Lock et al. 2009) provide means to begin discussions about the impact of place and time on cultural behaviours when related to rural and remote locations. Student teachers can be challenged to think about influences impacting on their social lives and behaviours in these contexts with the notion of 'place' providing 'a category of investigation and analysis' (Somerville, 2007).

Q1: What is the national picture of the preparation of early childhood teachers for teaching and living in rural and/or remote locations in Australia?

In our search we have not been able to identify a substantial body of literature about the preparation of early childhood educators for rural and/or remote practice. With the focus of the literature predominantly on primary and secondary education, more investigations of early childhood education (and the preparation for teachers for rural settings) are called for. However, these investigations will need to be mindful of the importance of conceptual linkages across the curriculum, theory practice links, sociocultural connections amongst students in teacher education programs, and personal links that shape the identity of teacher education (Hoban, 2005). To date there has been no examination of the national context across early childhood teacher education programs in Australia.

As the research literature indicated, in the past there has been little or no preparation of teachers for rural teaching, and emphasis was placed on helping beginning teachers get established once they had started (Baills et al 2002; Howe, 2006); now there is a stronger movement to prepare preservice teachers adequately before their first teaching appointment. Boylan (2010) is the latest in a series of research studies which take this view. However, the review presented indicates that programs, both at the teacher education level and professional development level, are adhoc in their offerings with no consistency across institutions.

Q2: What are the specific attributes aligned with early childhood educators working in rural and remote settings in Australia?

What has also become evident is, to date, there are no specific attributes aligned with early childhood teachers working in rural and/or remote settings across Australia. The implication is that teacher preparation courses are therefore unable to address such attributes in their course provision. This could act to firstly deter graduates taking up rural or remote teaching positions and, secondly, see them take up the positions and then not cope with the complexities that rural and/or remote locations can present.

Q3: How can early childhood educators be prepared to work in rural and remote ECEC settings in Australia?

Research is needed to produce evidence-based knowledge about working in rural and/or remote early childhood settings in Australia - informed by those that matter – the staff in the ECEC field. The literature review identified a lack of examination of the strengths, interests, needs and opportunities of rural and/or remote early childhood educators in terms of their initial and further education and training. Research is needed which lends a voice to educators, who typically are at the receiving end of education and training, as a way to ensure authentic involvement in informing and/or shaping educational qualifications and training experiences. Therefore, findings from the perspectives of educators themselves will add a new dimension to the data to inform the development of courses and modules within courses, ensuring more appropriate, effective and targeted initial preparation and ongoing professional learning.

Q4: What can we learn from ECEC educators already working in rural and remote locations?

There is a need to identify, through various research methods, the complexities of teaching and learning and the multiple influences that may affect an ECEC educator's professional growth in rural and/or remote locations. It is time to become empirically informed to take up both the challenges, and to also understand and learn from the current strengths and successful practices.

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