

*Submission to the National Inquiry
into Teacher Education*

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

made by the

RURAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL(RREAC)

RREAC was established in 1997 in Western Australia to provide an advocacy for rural and remote schools and to inform the minister with advice in issues relating to those schools.

The Council has a membership representing a wide range of providers and consumers of education, many of whom are rurally based and all of whom are committed to the enhancement of education and training in the non-urban settings.

RREAC's Mission:

To ensure fair, reasonable and equitable education and training access, participation and achievement by people who live in rural and remote Western Australia.

In support of this Mission, it is RREAC's belief that the teacher is the most significant factor in the provision of quality education and training and we commend the government on the establishment of this current inquiry.

RREAC is aware that there are issues associated with all of the terms of reference identified by the Inquiry that are of relevance to the pre-service preparation of rural and remote teachers. This submission, however, focuses on the fifth term of reference, namely

Examine the educational philosophy underpinning the teacher training courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure and materials, and methods for assessment and evaluation) and assess the extent to which it is informed by research.

RREAC's Position

Teachers appointed to rural schools are confronted with a professional and social situation largely unencountered during their pre-service programs. This is despite the fact that, in Australia, a significant percentage of newly qualified teachers are placed initially in rural and remote schools or are transferred to such schools early in their professional careers.

RREAC's position is underpinned by the following propositions:

Pre-service programs are deficient in rurally specific content and experience, being urban-based and urban-oriented.

Comment: The difficulties that arise from a lack of professional preparedness, ensure that teachers are poorly placed to adjust to their new situation or to capitalise on the advantages inherent in such rural appointments, and that for many beginning rural and remote teachers their major pre-occupation will be the 'struggle for survival'.

Rural and remote teachers have professional needs that differ considerably from those of teachers beginning their careers in urban schools.

Comment: For many, those needs are a function of the relative smallness of rural schools and of their organizational arrangements and instructional procedures. In small primary schools, for example, beginning teachers will encounter a multi-grade class not previously experienced during their pre-service preparation. In small secondary schools, and in particular the District High Schools (K-10 schools), because of small numbers of staff, many will be required to teach outside of their area of specialization.

They are a function also of the nature of rural communities and of the closeness of school-community relations. Beginning teachers are largely unfamiliar with these circumstances.

Few pre-service teacher education institutions provide courses specifically devoted to rural and remote schools.

Comment: Pre-service teacher training is based largely on an urban model of teaching which has little application to their present situation. It is thus claimed that the rural teachers experiences a framework of social interaction unlike that evident in the urban situation with which most are familiar.

Teachers appointed to a rural or remote school encounter a socio-cultural environment that they do not understand and from which they are alienated or estranged.

Comment: The majority of pre-service teacher education students come from an urban environment and have little or no experience of living and working in a rural setting. There is, for example, a qualitative difference in social-interaction between the rural and urban setting. For example;

- In a rural setting social interaction is less plastic and, at the same time, less superficial, less standardized, and less mechanical than the urban situation.

- The rural dweller is visible and known throughout the community. This means that they may not enjoy the freedom and privacy that is experienced by the urban dweller.
- The diminished institutional isolation evident in the rural community and currently sought after in the urban environment, is of significance for beginning rural teachers.
- As a function of this relationship, beginning teachers experience role diversity unencountered in the urban situation.
- Furthermore, they are likely to remain in those communities for a limited period only, and thus have little time in which to develop that understanding or appreciation.

It is the view of this Council that the most effective and achievable way to prepare beginning teachers for the professional and social experiences they are likely to encounter on their appointment to a rural and remote school is through a sustained period of rural teaching practice.

Teaching Practice

Students who plan to enter the teaching service undertake practice teaching in each year of their training and are generally required to spend more time in schools as their courses progress. The extent and format of this requirement varies according to the institution attended.

The significance of practice teaching in the students' overall pre-service preparation has been widely acknowledged. For many, it is accorded a place of central importance. Teachers in training place high value on practice teaching. They are well aware of the significant contribution practice makes to their overall professional development.

Practice teaching provides a learning situation in which teacher education students can relate facts, values and skills and attempt to discover the relationships. Students are provided with a purposeful series of supervised professional experiences in which they are able to apply, refine, and reconstruct theoretical learnings and through which they develop their teaching competence.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence to indicate the 'best way' this may be achieved there is general acceptance that, in part, it necessitates the exposure of students to a variety of school settings and experiences. If teaching competence is necessarily related to context then practical skill development must be context-specific and it behoves teacher education institutions to provide for a range of specific-context experiences for student teachers broad enough to equip them adequately for their immediately foreseeable teaching situations.

Rural Teaching Practice:

For the majority of beginning teachers that 'immediately foreseeable teaching situation' is in a rural or remote school. It could thus be assumed that students are provided with the opportunity to develop their teaching skills in that situation and gain some acquaintance with the environments and culture of their prospective students.

This is not the case. For most students, the bulk of the practice teaching component of their program is carried out in metropolitan schools. Although many institutions provide students with the opportunity to undertake practice in rural schools it would appear that little attempt is made to ensure that the majority of students take advantage of that opportunity.

Institutional commitment to this form of practice is dependent on both the perceived value of this experience and the magnitude of the organizational difficulties encountered. For example;

- Where large numbers of students are involved the possibility of exposing students to the widest variety of teaching contexts is limited.
- There can be little doubt that where practicing schools are geographically isolated from the training institution, specific difficulties are encountered.
- Significant travel and accommodation costs are incurred;
- Supervision is a major consideration.
- The professional competence of supervising teachers in whose classroom the student is placed is also a concern.

These are legitimate concerns and must be addressed by institutions. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that high priority should be given to that teaching situation similar to the one graduates are most likely to encounter on their first appointment, that is a rural or remote school.

The validity of some of the claims is open to question or can be resolved. For example;

- Rurally based organizations are in a position to assist with the arrangement for rural practice teaching and have indicated their willingness to do so.
- There are also competent on-site personnel in rural areas who are willing to act for the institutions in the supervision of students.
- While costs incurred through utilizing rural schools are real they cannot be legitimately viewed in isolation.

RREAC's position with regard to this latter point is that, seen as part of the total practice teaching budget, the additional expenditure on rural teaching practice is minimal. Furthermore, when related to the potential benefits to the student, the positive impact that it is likely to have on the beginner's

adjustment to their new situation and, of greater significance, the benefits that will flow to the student in their classrooms, a rural teaching practice can be seen to be highly cost effective.

It is not suggested that any of these alternatives would be cost free or without their difficulties. Rather, it is suggested that if rural practice teaching is seen as a valuable and relevant learning experience which assists graduates to adjust to their future roles, then institutions should persist in searching for ways to ensure that that experience is available.

RREAC is of the view that, where institutional convenience is the sole or overriding consideration in the allocation of students to rural schools, there is the danger that the unique value of a rural teaching experience will be negated.

Conclusion

There is little support to the claim that pre-service experiences, while not rurally specific, are nonetheless directly or indirectly applicable to rural schools. They are afforded little opportunity to develop an understanding of or empathy with rural communities within which those schools are situated.

Accordingly, it is RREAC's strongly held belief that

- **Rurally specific units of study be included as part of the core units of study in all pre-service teacher education programs;**
- **All pre-service teacher education students undertake at least one sustained period of teaching practice in a rural or remote location as part of their teacher education program.**
- **Pre-service teacher education institutions should be adequately resourced to enable them to provide students with a sustained period of teaching practice in a rural or remote setting**