ABSTRACT

A free response survey was administered to 100 self-identified mid and late career teachers in regional New South Wales to determine why they had chosen to work in a rural location, and identify the positive and negative aspects of their choice. This paper focuses on the 53 survey responses from these mid and late career teachers. A range of reasons was given for teaching in rural NSW, some altruistic, some opportunistic, with others related to a lifestyle choice. The teachers also reported on their perceived professional learning needs and the extent to which these had been addressed. An action research model of professional learning is proposed to address some of the professional learning challenges facing teachers in rural Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Rural teaching is often an enigma, as each teacher can perceive the experience differently depending on his or her priorities. Rural teachers’ perceptions can range from total commitment to their students, schools and communities, to a sense of personal and professional isolation. This can lead to teachers wishing to stay for some time or conversely, desperately trying to transfer out to ‘preferred areas’ where they anticipate they will experience less isolation, both personally and professionally.

Shortages of teachers willing to teach in Australian rural schools have been evident for some time (Collins, 1999; Hudson & Millwater, 2010; Lonsdale & Ingvarson, 2003; Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006), particularly in the areas of secondary mathematics and science (Harris & Farrell, 2007; Williams, 2005). Explanations of such shortages often convey a negative or ‘deficit’ view of teaching in rural areas. (Cornish, 2009; Down & Wooltorton, 2004; Lock et al., 2009). This can result in teachers being hesitant to take up a rural position or being eager to leave the country environs having only served for a short time.

This paper explores the perceptions of a group of mid and late career teachers working in rural and regional New South Wales with the objective of furthering our knowledge concerning the acquisition of teachers’ positive or negative impressions towards their placement. The study is part of a larger project, entitled ‘Bush Tracks’, which is described in more detail later in this paper.
RURAL TEACHING

Rural schools can be significantly different to non-rural or urban schools (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Research into rural teaching has highlighted the notion of transience (Cornish, 2009), as well as the challenges that teachers face in rural communities. Whilst the turnover of teachers can be viewed as an advantage in metropolitan schools – the infusion of ‘new blood’ (Boylan et al., 1993, p.111), within rural contexts is often perceived as an unwelcome disruption that jeopardises the stability of schools and the rural community (Boylan, et al., 1993; Cornish, 2009). Certainly, there is a body of literature (see e.g. Clifford, 1997; Cornish, 2009; McConaghy, 2006; Urry, 2000) that suggests an over-emphasis on ‘continuity’ while simultaneously identifying it as a natural phenomenon and a requirement of teacher growth and development. A recognised benefit of transience is the greater access to accelerated leadership opportunities that tend to arise in rural schools more readily than they do in city schools (Miller, Graham & Paterson, 2006).

Perceived Disadvantages of Rural Teaching

Rural teaching is often regarded in terms of its deficits. ‘The principal reason teachers leave rural areas is isolation; social, cultural and professional’ (Collins, 1999, p.1). As pre-service teachers often receive rural teaching positions as their first appointment, it is also important to consider their perceptions of a potential rural posting. Sharplin (2002) discovered that a lack of both human and physical resources concerned pre-service teachers. Specifically the absence of experienced teachers as potential mentors within their schools was of major concern. Other issues included: working with students from different cultural, socio economic and language backgrounds; the lack of resources to support the curriculum and Information Communication Training and difficulties accessing professional learning. A further concern was the capacity to cope with behavioural issues plus the complexities of multi-age and multi-grade classrooms (Sharplin, 2002).

Boylan et al. (1993, p.125) point out in their research that 42% of long-term rural school teachers stated that issues relating to the workplace were their greatest source of dissatisfaction. Many of their concerns were not derived from the children that they taught but included relationships with other teachers and executive staff, as well as ‘work related matters’ such as administration duties and programming development.

A study by Miller, Graham and Paterson (2006) indicated that rural school teachers often experienced difficulties in maintaining a distance between their personal and professional lives. School often encroached on their lives to the extent that teachers often felt under constant scrutiny resulting in what Miller et al. (2006) refer to as the ‘fishbowl effect’. Furthermore, although teaching in a rural context provided leadership opportunities to those seeking early promotion, others were intimidated by having to take on extra responsibilities, particularly while still inexperienced, in addition to carrying out expected classroom duties.
McConaghy et al. (2006) reported that acquiring effective professional learning was a common concern for rural teachers. The distances they had to travel, the time allowances required and the limited availability of casual teachers to cover for their absences often impacted on these teachers’ abilities to access quality professional learning.

**Perceived Advantages of Rural Teaching**

Although many deficits of rural teaching have been presented in research findings (e.g. Collins, 1999; Lyons et al., 2006), various advantages of rural teaching have also been documented, including the increased prospects of accelerated leadership, as well as securing an appointment in a ‘preferred area’ in the future (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). In fact, Boylan et al. (1993) studied the attitudes of long-term teachers who taught in rural communities and found that 90% expressed high job satisfaction levels while two-thirds indicated fairly high to very high satisfaction levels. Approximately half of these teachers stated that student relationships were their greatest source of satisfaction. However, these were the views of teachers who had generally made a conscious decision to ‘stay rural’, whether it be for personal or professional reasons, or both. Among the reasons provided by these teachers in relation to their high satisfaction levels were the supportive school and community environments; more opportunities to become involved in school and community activities; less discipline problems compared to urban schools; and positive local community and lifestyle issues, with the country being perceived as quieter, safer and child- and family-friendly (Boylan et al., 1993; Ralph, 2002). About two-thirds of the long-standing teachers felt that the rural communities in which they worked appreciated their commitment (Boylan et al., 1993). Furthermore, Ralph (2002) found that a cohort of teaching interns, along with their cooperating teachers, believed that rural teaching should not be viewed as a deficit.

**Professional Learning**

Difficulties concerning the professional learning of teachers in isolated communities has been acknowledged for some time (see e.g. Ramsey, 2000; Roberts, 2004; Vinson, 2002). One of the whole-school level activities, which Boylan et al. (1993) advocated in their model to help retain teachers in rural and remote schools, was improved access to professional learning. Besides matters of distance and a shortage of relieving casual teachers so that teachers can access professional learning, practicing rural teachers acknowledged that teacher mentoring in rural schools was often inadequate due to the high turnover of more experienced staff. Consequently, an important implication is the requirement for professional learning in the ‘knowledge of pedagogy’ that facilitates the re-contextualisation of rural school teaching practice (McConaghy et al., 2006, p.27).
BACKGROUND TO BUSH TRACKS

The Bush Tracks research collective was initiated at UNE. It comprises a group of academics from interdisciplinary backgrounds within the field of Education, who share an interest in rural teaching and rural leadership. From 2004 onwards, the group designed a number of research projects involving rural teachers, principals and communities. This paper reports the findings of one of these projects. It discusses survey results administered during the initial phase of Bush Tracks and the subsequent case studies that were carried out involving practicing rural teachers. For more information on the overall Bush Tracks project, see McConaghy et al. (2006).

RESEARCH METHODS

In this first stage of the research 100 surveys were administered to two groups, self-identified mid (n=50) and late career (n=50) rural school teachers. The survey data provided a broad picture of the career journeys of these teachers and identified individual teachers for follow up case studies. This report focuses on the survey findings of the mid and late career practising teachers. There were 53 responses in total from these two categories out of the 100 surveys administered so the response rate was slightly higher than 50%. Specifically this stage reports on why the mid and late career practising teachers were working in a rural location and what issues, both positive and negative, they faced.

All of the free responses to the open-ended questions in the survey instrument were typed out verbatim and then analysed to identify particular categories of response. These categories along with the numbers of responses identified for each were then tabulated for each item. The tabulated data are presented in table 1 along with exemplars from the various categories. A copy of the survey instrument developed for this part of the study is presented as an appendix (see Appendix A).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The initial survey question asked, “Why did you become a teacher?” Five categories of response were identified and these are presented in Table 1 below along with the number of responses in each. Note that in some of the tables below the numbers add up to more than the number of respondents (53) as some participants provided more than one response.
Table 1. Reasons for choosing teaching as a profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rewarding</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunistic/Dictated by circumstances</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External motivation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The largest number of responses (25) from within the practising teaching cohort identified that they had chosen teaching because they saw it as a profession as they viewed it as a rewarding career. For example, respondents C2 and L7 commented in the open-ended sections of the survey:

C2: Because I believe it is a very important profession – one that is always challenging and changing. I find my job rewarding on many different levels.

L7: Because I believe that six KLAs allow you to be doing what you love…e.g. Music, art, maths. You can pass on your passion about a subject through teaching.

Those categorised as altruistic (11 responses) tended to focus on their ‘need to make a difference’.

N7: I love the idea of making a difference in students’ lives and seeing them learn each day. I am always keen to make students’ time at school enjoyable/fun.

N8: I believe that through education, freedom and dignity are achieved. I want to help people achieve this.

However, there was also a group of teachers who had responded to an opportunity that arose or had had their choice of profession dictated by circumstances (11 responses). Often this appeared to be related to issues of gender and/or financial considerations:

JH 5: Teachers were well respected and reasonably well paid at that time. If you were an intelligent female at the time there were few options (nursing/teaching). The only way I could gain a tertiary education was a Teachers’ College scholarship. You paid up front otherwise.

JJ4: I worked for 2 years in the cities in a bank, which in those days was a dead end job for women (they weren’t even on the counter!)

L1: I came from a working class background and the only avenue to a university education was through a teacher’s scholarship.
Other individuals were clearly ‘tied’ to their location via external factors and found a profession that accommodated this (9 responses):

C1: It’s a job I could do living in a rural community and I was married to a farmer.

The teachers were then asked why they had decided to pursue their profession in a rural community. Again there was a range of responses that were grouped into 5 broad categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunistic</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Reasons for working in a rural community

In all, there were 45 responses (including attractive lifestyle and background) that indicated that lifestyle was a significant factor in their decision. In many cases these responses also indicated that being in a rural setting was entirely voluntary and not dictated by other circumstances:

N7: Definitely did not want to teach in the city as I have a young family and I want to bring them up in the country.

JJ2: I wanted a different experience from my city up-bringing and it’s cheaper too.

N6: I started my career in the Western Suburbs and quality of life…led me to teaching in a rural community.

For others the move to a rural location was dictated by other circumstances (11 responses) and lifestyle became a reason for them to stay. In some cases these were associated with economic benefits:

JJ5: My husband was transferred to Gunnedah. We decided that the lifestyle was more favourable and affordable in comparison with Sydney.

However, for a significant group of respondents (19 = opportunistic), ‘greater job opportunities’ or ‘enhanced career prospects’ played a part in their decision to teach in a rural area. So comments like ‘I wanted a job as soon as possible’; ‘looking for promotion’; and ‘more opportunities’ were offered as reasons for settling in a rural environment.
Teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions about their professional learning experiences in a rural setting. Initially they were asked about formal learning activities and to comment on the effectiveness of these.

While some of these had been self-initiated, for example, MEd, BEd and Graduate Diploma programs, the vast majority were provided either by the school or outside agencies. The examples provided were wide ranging and in fact some teachers responded that there were simply too many to list. Furthermore, these were generally viewed as highly effective and useful. Only one member of the sample group commented that they had received ‘very little P.D.’ as there was limited access.

Only three responses from within the sample commented that components of the professional learning that they had received were ineffective. In one case this was due to a lack of follow up on the training and in the other two, a perceived lack of relevance to rural school teaching was the criticism. Teachers were also asked to nominate training needs. The vast majority identified one or more and although these were quite wide-ranging they could be categorised into seven broad areas and these have been summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Areas of perceived professional learning need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Communication Technology</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour management</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject specific</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic / Pedagogy</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visits</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common area of professional learning need identified was that of leadership (16 responses). In some cases this was linked to a desire for promotion or a move to a larger school, but it may also reflect the fact that in small rural schools, teachers are often thrust into leadership positions without significant or in some cases any training (Miller et al., 2006).

Of particular interest, were the comments of one teacher who asked for training from outside the profession:

*C7: Would like to be involved in more leadership courses run by private industry, as I feel at this stage in my professional development this area has more to offer my development than courses run by teaching peers.*
Classroom related issues whether generic, such as behaviour management (4 responses) or subject specific, made up the bulk of the remaining professional learning needs and a number of teachers suggested that visiting other schools to observe their systems and practices would be helpful.

Although Information Communication Technology training was seen as desirable (9 responses) with some specific requests such as training in Smartboard, it is perhaps surprising that this number was so low, given the pace of change in this area. This may be a reflection that some teachers in rural areas are not always aware of the latest Information Communication Technology developments that are taking place or because of isolation these teachers often exploit ‘ICT fixes’ which mean that they are very up to date with the technology already thus require little training. Alternatively they may not perceive it as a priority area for professional learning.

Teachers were asked to list and comment on those factors that impacted upon their ability to undertake professional learning. Again the responses were grouped into a number of categories that have been summarized in table 4. As might be expected the issue of distance and the related time and cost factors were offered as common reasons why professional development opportunities were not taken up.

\[ JH5: \text{The need to travel long distances to go to courses requires time away from my family and costs.} \]

One principal also commented on the impact the time factor had on their school.

\[ K3: \text{The fact that I am out of my school for extended periods …thus not able to support my staff, students and parents.} \]

This situation was presumably exacerbated by problems of accessing and employing casual teachers to cover for staff during professional learning periods, an issue highlighted by 14 responses.

\[ \text{Table 4. Factors that impact on the ability of teachers to access professional development opportunities.} \]

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
  \hline
  Factors & n \\
  \hline
  Distance & 30 \\
  Time & 16 \\
  Resources & 17 \\
  Motivation & 16 \\
  Cost & 14 \\
  No casual & 14 \\
  Awareness & 2 \\
  \hline
\end{tabular}
Finally, teachers were asked if working in the context of a rural school facilitated their professional growth. Of the (53) respondents, 36 teacher responses illustrated that it did. Usually this was related to the smaller size of schools, consequent leadership opportunities and the chance to be more creative in their teaching. In fact many of the respondents were quite emphatic in their affirmation of this view. For example:

C7: Professional growth of teachers is markedly enhanced in rural schools, as with often a smaller teaching staff, the teachers need to take a greater responsibility and take on more roles in the school.

C6: Yes, smaller classes allow teachers to teach more effectively. When teachers are forced to, or decide to teach outside their area, it makes them “think outside the square.”

N4: Definitely, rural teachers are thrown in the deep end – if they don’t sink, they learn extremely valuable and diverse teaching/coping strategies.

However, six responses illustrated that these teachers perceived the rural context as a ‘double-edged sword’ in terms of professional growth:

JJ8: Yes and no. In some ways, as you need to take on a broad range of responsibilities quickly. In other ways no, because of the isolation.

N6: Yes and no. Sometimes there a mindset is formed that once you are in a ‘small school’ or a rural school, you do not have the skills to function in a ‘large city school’ or a larger rural school.

L6: When the school is small, you have to be responsible for a larger number of jobs, and share the load (but) you are unable to plan with same stage teachers.

Finally, there were 4 responses that indicated that professional growth was limited in rural schools, largely as a result of isolation, conservatism and limited professional learning opportunities:

D7: The professional growth of teachers in rural schools can be stunted by isolation.

L1: No, it distances you from the ‘professional buzz’ of Sydney. It stifles you because the staff is often very set in their ways (often having been in the school for 20+ years). Students’ expectations are very traditional/conservative.

JH5: The lack of networking when you are in a small department is a serious problem. In the city I had HSC marking and would network with highly experienced teachers.
CONCLUSION

The survey data indicates that the participants, all practising rural school teachers, became teachers, and located to regional NSW, largely for either altruistic or pragmatic/opportunistic motives. Often ‘staying rural’ for these teachers was the result of lifestyle factors although in some cases other factors influenced their decisions to remain in the country. These findings are consistent with those of Boylan et al. (1993, p.122) who reported long-term rural teachers’ intentions to ‘stay rural’ was closely related to their commitment to teaching (81%), as well as their perceptions that ‘rurality’ provided them with healthy, safe, clean living environments, with less crime, and the opportunity to bring up their families in a caring community. In fact, Sharplin’s (2002) study of pre-service teachers highlighted their perceptions that the tendency for rural schools to be small, actually provided teachers with more chances for close interactions between other teachers, their students and the community.

The positives, along with ‘good news’ stories, need to be publicised widely among practising and pre-service teachers so that they do not view rural teaching only from a ‘deficit’ position. This study has illustrated that many teachers enjoy what they consider is a quality lifestyle both professionally and personally, for their families and themselves. Pre-service teachers should also be provided with a more positive view of what rural teaching can entail, perhaps via the experience of a rural practicum. Teacher education providers can potentially play an important role in supporting their pre-service teachers in gaining a more impartial view of rural teaching via modules or units of work that focus on effective rural teaching practice and the lived experiences of rural teachers. Ultimately, the aim of such efforts would be to develop a more positive perception of rural teaching. Indeed, there are advocates (Green & Reid, 2004; Ramsey, 2000) who call for new and creative ways to promote cooperative relationships between teacher education institutions, education systems, teachers and rural schools in order to promote quality teaching and learning, thus delivering more equity for rural students.

The survey revealed that rural teachers desired professional learning most frequently in the areas of leadership and generic pedagogy. They considered the biggest obstacles to acquiring effective professional learning opportunities to be distance, time, cost, resources, motivation and insufficient casual teachers to cover their absences. Lack of access to more experienced teacher mentors within the same rural school was also noted. This factor was perceived as having a negative impact on teachers’ professional learning and growth. This is a key issue given that Boylan et al. (1993) regards access to professional learning as one of the whole school factors that can promote teacher retention among rural teachers.

Generic programs of professional learning assume that all teachers in all contexts require the same professional learning although it is clear that urban and rural schools have discrete contexts and requirements. It follows that professional learning, as well as pre-service teacher education, should promote re-contextualised
pedagogies that are sensitive to and accommodate both urban and rural areas (McConaghy et al., 2006). In fact a major ‘needs assessment’ might be carried out among teachers within regions or parts of regions in order to identify ‘shared’ areas of professional learning need.

The long list of logistical issues viewed as limiting the access of rural teachers to professional learning, including time, cost, resources, distance and the absence of casual teachers, must be dealt with effectively if rural schools are to attract beginning, as well as more experienced teachers. Certain measures, such as employing a temporary casual/relief teacher across a number of rural schools in order to cover the rostered days of rural teachers for professional learning might help in this respect. Furthermore, additional resources beyond those usually allocated to these teachers are likely to be required in order to provide rural teachers with similar opportunities to access professional learning as their metropolitan colleagues, e.g. more travel time, more resources and finances to cover costs. This would facilitate a greater degree of equity between rural and urban teachers in the area of professional learning.

It is likely that the delivery of face-to-face professional learning will continue to be problematic in regional Australia simply because of the high associated costs. It is also questionable how effective such professional learning may be. Certainly, Grundy (1995) has questioned its effectiveness:

A common conception of professional development is that it’s a ‘pit stop’ activity. That is, when teachers are ‘low on fuel,’ in need of a ‘re-tread’ … they are taken out of their classrooms and schools and ‘fixed up’ with a bit of professional development. (p.7)

Grundy goes on to argue that this approach to professional learning is inevitably of limited value because it lacks any continuity. We agree with Grundy when she states that we need to get away from the metaphor of the racetrack when considering professional learning. Furthermore, we concur with her view that a metaphor of a ‘journey’ might be appropriate for the idea of continuous professional learning and that action research can offer a means of achieving this. As Grundy suggests, action research is a form of practical action which teachers undertake as part of, not separate from, their professional work. Moreover, this sort of professional learning is for everyone, not just for those in whom some form of professional deficit has been diagnosed.

According to McIntyre (2000) action research aims to help teachers who wish to make changes in their classroom practice, and plan, implement and evaluate these procedures according to a set of established principles. Moreover, teachers involved in action research should have evidence to show that they have been innovative and reflective, or that they have kept abreast of current developments and tried them out.
Bloomfield, Taylor and Maxwell (2004) have demonstrated that action research can have a significant positive effect on primary teachers’ confidence. However, action research is not without its problems. Teachers’ time, work practices and initial training impose constraints on their involvement in research activities, and Gitlin and Gore (2000) warn that unless these factors are taken into account little progress is likely to be made in terms of improving practice. Nevertheless, if conducted effectively, action research can be extremely empowering for teachers. Teachers seeking solutions to self identified problems, acquire a sense of ownership of the solutions and the knowledge generated through their action research projects (Atweh, 2002).

The advances in communication technology, in particular the advent of the national broadband which is specifically aimed at regional Australia should allow teachers in remote areas to communicate more effectively and facilitate the delivery of professional learning. It should also allow groups of teachers to receive training in action research, develop research projects together, share their findings and contact mentors and other ‘critical friends’ as their projects develop. Furthermore, the argument presented in the research over recent years is that to be effective, professional learning needs to be based upon a coherent theory of learning that takes into account the “social situatedness” of teachers’ work (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p.955). We argue that action research allows teachers to undertake professional learning in a manner that is relevant to their rural context in which they are situated.

Fieman-Nemsar (2001) refers to the importance of the second and third stages of teaching following the induction stage of ‘learning to teach’. During these stages a novice teacher learns to experiment and consolidate their practice, focusing less on the classroom ‘survival’ and more on ‘how they are teaching’ and meeting the needs of their students. Often novice teachers have their first appointments in rural schools. However these same teachers may be ‘long gone’ from ‘the bush’ before they reach the second and third stages of teaching. Obviously, such issues hamper access to effective teacher mentoring from more experienced teachers plus effective and relevant professional learning. Ultimately, all of these points impact on the retention of effective teachers and whether these teachers ‘stay rural’ or flee ‘the bush’!

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the other members of the Bush Tracks team: Cathryn McConaghy, Lorraine Graham, Judy Miller, David Patterson, Linley Cornish, Joy Hardy, Genevieve Noone and Di Bloomfield for their ongoing support.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

1. Why did you become a teacher?
2. Why did you decide to teach in a rural community?
3. What formal professional learning activities have you participated in as a rural teacher? Were your professional learning needs met in these activities?
4. What non-formal professional learning activities have you participated in as a rural teacher? Were your professional learning needs met in these activities?
5. If you answered no effectiveness, which of your professional learning needs were unmet?
6. What professional learning would you like to undertake?
7. What factors impact on your ability to undertake professional learning – formal and informal?
8. Does experience in rural schools facilitate the professional growth of teachers? Explain why or why not.