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ARTICLE



Exploring metropolitan university pre-service teacher motivations and barriers to teaching in rural schools

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ABSTRACT

Staffing shortages has been a consistent problem for Australian rural schools. This paper addresses the rural staffing shortage by exploring the motivations and barriers faced by pre-service teachers in an Australian metropolitan university as they explore the prospect of teaching in a rural school. The paper examines two research ideas prevalent in the research literature. Firstly, that introducing pre-service teachers to rural placement experiences enhances their desire to seek teaching positions in rural schools. Secondly, that pre-service teachers from regional or rural backgrounds are more likely to seek teaching jobs in rural settings than their metropolitan counterparts. We draw on data from a longitudinal qualitative study with pre-service teachers in a metropolitan university that were interviewed before, during and after their rural placement. We found that while the second idea stands the test, the first idea, undertaking a rural placement, is not a guarantee to redressing the staffing shortage.

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Rural education; teacher education; pre-service teachers; rural placement

Introduction

Research focussed on the staffing of rural schools in Australia has shown that for many schools in rural areas, teacher shortages has been a consistent problem. The challenges for many rural schools have centred around recruiting and retaining teachers, especially at secondary school level (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Halsey, 2009; Kline, White, & Lock, 2013; Somerville, Plunkett, & Dyson, 2010; Trinidad, Sharplin, Ledger, & Broadley, 2014). In a recent discussion paper emerging from a national review into regional, rural and remote education, Halsey states that “notwithstanding the efforts of governments, attracting and retaining the best teachers for regional, rural and remote schools continues to be one of the most persistent challenges on the “education agenda”” (Halsey, 2017); and whilst this certainly is not the reality for some rural schools, it is the plight for many. This difficulty in attracting and recruiting teachers has a direct impact on the quality of education available to students in rural spaces (Cuervo, 2016; White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, & Reid, 2011) and is a cause for national concern (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Halsey, 2017).

This paper addresses the rural staffing shortage by exploring the motivations and barriers faced by pre-service teachers in an Australian metropolitan university as they

explore the prospect of teaching in a rural school. The paper examines two ideas which are prevalent in the research literature on rural school staffing. Firstly, that introducing pre-service teachers to rural placement experiences enhances their desire to seek teaching positions in a rural school (Halsey, 2009; Sharplin, 2009) upon completion of their training. Secondly, that pre-service teachers from regional or rural backgrounds are more likely to seek a teaching position in a rural setting than their urban counterparts (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Lyons, 2009; Sommerville et al., 2010).

To examine these ideas, eight pre-service teachers completing their initial-teacher education in a metropolitan university in the state of Victoria were interviewed three times each (before, during and after their rural placement experience) over a period of 14 months. A longitudinal lens to pre-service teachers' attitudes to rural teaching provides a unique opportunity to analyse the dynamic experiences of these young people over a period of time. Longitudinal research renders continuity and change visible, enabling researchers to test their original assumptions and to better understand social change in the phenomenon (Tyler, Cuervo, & Wyn, 2011). A longitudinal approach rather than a one-time snapshot of the research problem also enhances researchers' ability to understand what factors and which institutions and other social actors impact participants' decisions. The paper continues with a mapping of the problem of recruiting and retaining staff in the research literature followed by an exploration of the two prevailing ideas that are commonly identified as helping rural schools improve their staffing: opportunities for rural placements within initial teacher education and the link between a pre-service teacher's rural background as motivation to work in a rural school. We continue by describing our research methods, followed by a presentation of the most relevant findings for this paper. We conclude with an extensive analysis of the findings responding to the two research questions which drive our study alongside a reflection of how these findings reveal various opportunities and challenges for rural schools.

Mapping rural school staffing

In Australia, rural schools encounter distinct challenges in terms of staffing. It has been extensively argued that a lack of incentives is preventing teachers from seeking employment in Australia's less populated areas with most teacher graduates only considering teaching appointments in urban centres (Australian Secondary Principals Association [ASPA], 2007; Hasley, 2009; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Lyons, 2009). Being away from family and significant relationships is another important factor discouraging pre-service and in-service teachers from choosing to work in rural schools (Kline & Walker-Gibbs, 2015). Additionally, a lack of education, work and recreational opportunities for teachers' family members can also contribute to a sense of isolation with teachers not prioritising a rural appointment when job hunting (Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Lyons, 2009). Rural schools become "unattractive" to teachers, facing unequal competition from better resourced metropolitan and private schools (Trinidad et al., 2014); thus reinforcing a vicious cycle for rural areas in further disadvantaging their students.

Rural schools not only have difficulties in attracting teachers but they also confront a constant challenge in retaining teachers. It has been asserted that a significant

proportion of graduate teachers are prepared to leave the profession within 5 years of service due to excessive workload and responsibilities and poor employment conditions (ASPA, 2007; Kelly & Fogarty, 2015; Somerville et al., 2010), this is further compounded in rural settings when teachers are faced with even greater odds, such as those mentioned above. Finding specialist relief staff is another critical concern for rural schools with school authorities repeatedly claiming that they are forced to staff programs with unqualified teachers in high demand curriculum areas such as Maths, Special Needs, Health & Physical Education, English, Society and Environment, LOTE and Information Technology (Australian Education Union [AEU], 2007a; Sharplin, 2014). Moreover, McKenzie and colleagues (2008) argue that teacher shortages are often “hidden” as schools and school systems use different strategies to cope with this issue. Some of these strategies include combining classes across year levels; recruiting less qualified teachers; placing teachers in teaching positions outside their field; sharing programs with other schools or reducing the curriculum.

The problem of rural staff recruitment and retention has its roots across several factors. For example, an array of studies suggest that insufficient employment incentives (e.g. salary and annual leave) and excessive workload deter teacher graduates from considering jobs in rural areas (AEU, 2007a; ASPA, 2007; Somerville et al., 2010). Principals in rural schools have agreed that the workload for teachers has dramatically increased in the last decade (AEU, 2007a) and beginning teachers argue that “workload” and “pay” are their two priority concerns (Australian Education Union [AEU], 2007b; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Other reports have argued that the “rural” factor complicates this picture: the further away from metropolitan and regional centres, the greater the difficulties of balancing supply and demand of staffing (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2010; McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon, & Murphy, 2010; White, 2015).

Employment uncertainty also plays a significant role. Somerville and colleagues (2010, p. 53) argue that for new teachers in Victoria, the common form of employment is a one year contract. In their study of “new teachers” in rural Victoria, they found that teachers expecting to stay less than 3 years in the school mentioned “contract employment” as the main reason for this decision. Research by Pietsch and Williamson (2010) and by the Productivity Commission (2012) supports Somerville and colleagues’ findings. Furthermore, teacher graduates are more likely to start their careers on fixed term or casual contracts, which carries less benefits and entitlements, including lack of access to professional development and mentoring that is available to those on longer term or ongoing contracts (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

A second important factor in deterring teachers in taking a rural post, is the issue of feeling professionally and personally isolated. On the one hand, research has shown that the proximity and transparency between the school staff and the community contribute to “feelings of connectedness and personal networks of support” that might result in a better quality of education (Miller, Paterson, & Graham, 2005, pp. 11–12). Working in a rural school can generate a feeling of belonging to an educational community and provide a greater sense of purpose for teachers (Cuervo, 2016). However, on the other hand, for teachers in rural spaces, the blurring of the school-community boundary can also produce a higher visibility of their role and work; thus, generating greater scrutiny by parents and the community at large. As Miller and colleagues (2005, pp.12–13)

argued, for teachers in small rural communities “fading into the background” is not an option in their time out of school. Moreover, Halsey (2006, p. 60) refers to the limited spaces for beginning rural teachers compared to their urban counterparts to hide from “making errors” and recover from them without damaging their career. This can be particularly detrimental for beginning teachers, new leaders and for staff coming from a more anonymous urban environment. Furthermore, a lack of interaction with other teachers in their subject area has also been a major cause for concern for rural teachers (Sharplin, 2002). A study in rural schools in Victoria has shown that teachers in rural schools felt what they described as “curriculum loneliness” (Cuervo, 2016). That is, the lack of a teaching partnership in a curriculum area or an integrated professional culture created a sense of isolation, which makes working in a rural school challenging. Teachers in these schools expressed a concern about not being able to associate and collaborate with other teachers, thus limiting the opportunities to reflect on their work, their teaching, and the pedagogical issues they face in the classroom. In sum, professional and personal barriers seem to affect good rural school staffing to the detriment of the quality of the provision of education.

Improving rural schools staffing: the case for place and practice

Against these challenges, some studies have suggested two important factors to redress this issue. Firstly, that any success in recruiting and retaining staff in rural schools begins with their initial teacher preparation (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 2000; White et al., 2011). Thus, as per our first research question, the researchers have affirmed that teaching placements in rural schools play a critical role in influencing pre-service teachers’ decisions to continue in the profession and to take up a rural post (e.g. Azano & Stewart, 2015; Kline et al., 2013; Trinidad et al., 2014). This is an important factor given the traditional weak connection between higher education teacher education programs and rural teaching depicted in policy and research studies (see Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1988; Green & Reid, 2004; HREOC, 2000; Kline et al., 2013; Sharplin, 2009). It has been argued that this weak connection generates in pre-service and beginning teachers a lack of “rural” knowledge that derives from a deficit view of working in rural schools (see Campbell & Yates, 2011; Wallace & Boylan, 2009). White and colleagues (2011) have affirmed that an initial teacher education curriculum that incorporates a rural placement enables future teachers to develop realistic insights and knowledge of the community where they will work and live. Goodnough and Mulcahy’s (2011) study in Canada determined that even a four-week placement enabled pre-service teachers to develop future-decision making about whether to teach in rural schools.

Furthermore, an Australian national study has found that more than 60% of pre-service teachers who undertake a rural teaching placement have “reinforced” or “confirmed” through the experience the decision to take a rural appointment (Halsey, 2009). Similarly, another national study confirmed that rural and regional practicums were deemed useful experiences for pre-service teachers to find out if they were prepared and willing to take a rural post once they qualified to teach (Kline et al., 2013). The placement is not just useful for those willing to go “rural” but also for those that decide it is not for them. Kline and colleagues (2013) argue that discovering that a rural posting

is not the right fit for oneself contributes to reduction of teacher turnover which is prevalent in rural schools hampering the delivery of good quality education to rural students. The authors also stress that a critical aspect of the success of rural practicums is the establishment of a fluid and organic relationship between university-school-community. They argue that pre-service teachers appreciate the supportive community environment which enhances a sense of belonging and purpose to their work. Thus, the purpose of the rural practicum is not just about learning the professional ropes in a particular space like the rural school or classroom but also raising an awareness of the needs of students and the community. As White and Kline (2012, p. 36) state, it is not only about “classroom” ready but also ‘being “community ready”’. Somerville et al. (2010) agree that the classroom is not an isolated site of learning from the rural community because teachers learn about the place where they work through the students in their classes and similarly, they learn about their students through their close-knit community involvement.

Our second research question, based on previous research, states that graduate teachers that grew up in rural places are more likely to choose to work in rural schools (Campbell & Yates, 2011; Lyons, 2009; Somerville et al., 2010). Thus, contrary to the idea that government incentives (e.g. rent subsidies, travel allowances) are a major factor to entice new recruits into rural schools, it is argued in the literature that a teacher’s familiarity and knowledge of rural settings is the most important factor that motivates them to stay in a rural town or to leave the city to take up jobs in non-metropolitan schools. For instance, Campbell and Yates’ (2011) study of South Australian pre-service teachers found that having experienced some level of education in a rural place had a clear relationship to the desire of teaching in a rural school. Lyons’s (2009) national study on rural staffing showed that familiarity with the rural space is a strong influence on taking up a rural teaching job. Furthermore, once placed in a rural school, many teachers stayed there due to their “satisfaction with the lifestyle, school and community” (p. 176). Azano and Stewart (2015, p. 8) in the United States agree that a rural-connection, “a unique sensibility”, might influence pre-service teachers’ decision to work in rural places. They caution, however, that relying only on teachers from a rural background might undermine the diversity of the workforce of rural schools. White and colleagues (2009) agree that while the rural *habitus* of a pre-service teacher might influence a positive connection to this space, the responsibility to adequately staff rural schools cannot rely solely on rural communities and people, and regional universities. We turn now to the research methods of this study, followed by findings that respond to our two research questions.

Methods and data sources

Participants for this research project were recruited from the Master of Teaching Secondary Program at a metropolitan university in Victoria, Australia. The recruitment of participants was carried out through a general email to the 28 pre-service teachers in the Master of Teaching who had volunteered to participate in a rural placement program as part of their degree. The 28 pre-service teachers came from a greater pool of 81 pre-service teachers that attended the initial “rural teaching information seminar”

session at the beginning of their degree. Ethics approval was obtained through the Human Ethics Committee at the researchers' university.

Of the 28 students contacted, eight students, six females and two males, replied positively to take part in the project. Their ages ranged from 23 to 30 years, all studying to gain a qualification to teach in secondary schools with areas of specialization ranging from music, geography to business and social sciences. Two participants were originally from a rural area, another was currently living with her partner in a rural town and the other six participants were from the metropolitan city of Melbourne (population 4 million). The sample size is particularly small due to the nature of the research being undertaken and because of the inherent low numbers of students who volunteer to complete rural placements. As this is an exploratory study, it does not intend to make any broad generalizations about the reasons and obstacles to take a teaching appointment in a rural school. The research, however, aims to highlight a range of motivations, commitments and barriers faced by pre-service teachers who show interest in working in a school in a rural community.

All of the eight pre-service teachers completed their placement in a rural town located three hours away from Melbourne with a population of four thousand people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2012). Traditionally the community was in a "production" landscape area (farming – sheep and cattle) but in the last few decades it has become increasingly an amenity area with a burgeoning tourist industry that attracts 1.2 million people, particularly to the nearby Alpine region (ABS, 2012; see Holmes, 2006, for an explanation of different rural landscapes). Each participant was asked to participate in three semi-structured interviews: before, during and after their five-week rural placement. Examining the different stages of placements provided a better understanding of change and continuity in pre-service motivations and challenges toward working in rural schools. Before their placement, participants were asked to explain their reasons for undertaking a rural placement. Interview questions invited participants to describe their placement experience including what they most and least enjoyed. During and after the placement, participants were also asked about their relationship with the school staff, particularly with their mentor teacher, members of the community, and their perceptions and experiences of living in a rural community. They were also asked to describe what factors may encourage them to work in a rural school and conversely what factors would discourage them from working in a rural school. All participants were also asked to indicate how strong their commitment to take on a teaching appointment was at each of the three interview opportunities. Each set of interviews were conducted over the phone, audio-tape recorded and professionally transcribed. The qualitative data was entered in the NVivo program. Data was coded based on "a priori" and "emergent" themes. By coding or breaking down information into small pieces and providing each small piece of information with a label, it allowed the identification of meaningful data. In this paper, "a priori" and "emergent" themes work towards testing the two research questions above. Finally, in the next sections we distinguish between "rural" (participants currently living and/or originally from a rural town) and "metro" (originally and currently living in an urban place) participants' background. This distinction enables us to better understand how place and experience shape pre-service teachers' decision-making.

Seeking a rural post

After three rounds of interviews conducted before, during and after their rural placement we found a strong continuity in the pre-service teachers' attitudes towards taking a rural school appointment. In the first round of interviews (pre-placement) all participants expressed an interest in teaching in a rural school. While for some, this interest was weaker than for others, it became clear throughout the three interview stages that the three participants with a "rural" background were the most committed to working in a rural school. Of these three participants, one was also applying to urban schools at the end of the study. While she was still committed to a rural posting after her placement, she stated that her decision was subject to the working conditions offered by the school, and unlike her peers, she was most concerned about whether her job was stable and secure. The other two "rural" participants remained exclusively committed to a rural teaching job by the end of this study. As one of these two participants described: "I got exposed to the country lifestyle when I was visiting him (her boyfriend). I just came to sort of really love it... and if I can teach as well at a rural school that would be amazing". This participant stated in her pre-placement interview that she did not have any experience studying or working in a rural school. She was drawn to the idea of becoming a rural teacher through her personal relationship (with her boyfriend), and was also drawn to the rural lifestyle, the community ethos and landscape ("very green, very grassy").

The other "rural" participant, originally from a rural town, commented that she was willing to seek a rural post but not in her hometown: "I want to live in a small rural community, that's where I feel comfortable, but not where I grew up". She also wanted to experience "what it's like from the other side" – being a rural teacher rather than a rural student. As mentioned above and similar to all participants, job stability and working conditions were important factors in determining in which rural school she will take her first teaching job. For both these "rural" participants, the idea of living in a close-knit community and enjoying the outdoors lifestyle was the key motivator in pursuing employment in a rural school. We take from our three "rural" participants an important consideration about lifestyle and significant others as a pull to work in a rural school. In other words, a sense of belonging to people and places permeated these pre-service teachers' motivation to undertake a rural post.

Despite their different decisions to seek a rural or urban appointment after their placement, participants also shared some common views about what a rural school placement might entail in their pre, during and post placement interviews. They all confirmed and shared a commonality in their views of the "good things" about rural teaching. For instance, all participants praised the quality of life in a small community in their five week placement experience. The common thread was the notion of caring and reciprocity amongst people within these communities. Embedded in this notion of caring was the idea of being responsible for others, "looking out for your neighbour", as one of the *metro* participants put it. Indeed, in comparing their urban and rural placements (they all completed an urban placement prior to their rural one), the latter was rated more positively due to a "welcoming community", the "small size classes", and the familiarity that developed with their students: "you know the students, and their

families". This "personal" quality of rural teaching was highly valued amongst participants and was considered quite distinct from their metropolitan school placements.

Entrenched deficit views on rural teaching

Despite this positive outlook toward rural teaching, all participants before, during and after their placements held some "deficit" views about rural schooling. Compared to urban schools, rural schools were described, particularly during their pre-placement interviews, as poorly resourced and poorly staffed with many schools having to "make do" with teachers on staff teaching in areas outside their expertise. A recurrent theme over the three stages of the study was the idea that there was a lower expectation of students than what they found in urban schools, and that this affected the quality of teaching and learning, and student aspirations. Interestingly, one of the participants, with no prior experience of living or working in a rural place, stated in a pre-placement interview that rural schools did not offer "a stressful environment" and "they are not trying to make all these kids achieve great results". In this participants' view, this was a positive aspect of rural schooling. This was also based on a view that rural schools "have an acceptance of not everyone having to go to university". Implicit in this view is a residual idea of rural schooling (Cuervo, 2016) as a second-rate institution that does not demand from its students the same level of excellence as that expected in urban schools.

Given that six out of the eight participants had no prior experience of studying or teaching in a rural school, it is important to identify where these deficit perceptions are coming from. Participants suggested that these deficit discourses were constructed through discussions in the teacher education subjects at university. In this urban university space, it was suggested that there is "less academic pressure" in rural schools, greater "classroom management concerns" and an accepted view that rural schools are "disadvantaged". Participants revealed that their "informants" were classmates rather than any research literature studied in the subjects. They pointed out that rural content was scarce in the teacher education program and for many pre-service teachers they did not have a solid understanding of what to expect in a rural school.

Studies have asserted that this deficit view hinders the prospect of staff recruitment for rural schools, discouraging prospective teachers from considering rural schools (Halsey, 2009; Somerville et al., 2010; White et al., 2011). Our study also found that in the pre, during and post-placement interviews, this deficit view did not change significantly, with six out of eight participants stating that they found that their mentor teachers hold lower expectations for their students than what they experienced in their urban placements. As one participant put it in her post-placement interview: "metro placement teachers were far more likely to really sort of push students further". Another participant, who chose to pursue a rural posting, stated that her mentor affirmed: "you'll have to adjust your teaching as you get in there, because you're going to see these students can't do much." The participant, however, did not share her mentor's view of the students. During classes, she asked students "what do you like of the subject" and they replied that "it's boring, that's why we don't want to do the work."

Furthermore, some pre-conceived concerns noted by participants in their pre-placement interviews around anticipated poor classroom behaviour, were not founded

during their placement. While some participants experienced classroom management problems, which might be expected of novice or pre-service teachers, in general, they found rural students collaborative and willing to learn. Further they commented during their placement interviews that when they met their students “outside the schools, they were really well behaved and really nice”. Overall, even despite some mentors holding low expectations of their students, participants were very positive of their working experience with teachers and mentors in the rural school community. Finally, participants confirmed two perceptions held before going on their rural placement. Firstly, they enjoyed teaching in smaller-sized classes than those in their previous urban experience. Secondly, they enjoyed the good close-knit communities, stating that the “friendliness” in the community was a positive aspect to take into account when making a decision about applying for work in a rural school.

The impact of a precarious teaching labour market

Interviews revealed that the five students with no connection to rural Victoria never seriously considered applying for a rural teaching position and were simply motivated by the opportunity “to do something different”, or where “interested in different experiences”, in order “to get a more diverse experience and challenge” themselves. They viewed the rural placement as a *frontier* experience, or a “rite of passage in becoming an experienced teacher” as one participant stated. Another participant stated that the rural experience offered him the “opportunity to grow as a teacher and have more responsibilities”. One participant from an urban background stated from the outset of this study that he had no intentions of taking a rural teaching job. In accordance with the literature, distance from family and friends and missing the “urban lifestyle” were common barriers discouraging them taking up rural jobs. Only a long-term secure job could sway him to work outside metropolitan Melbourne. Nonetheless, he was undertaking the placement based on the belief that “if you can make it in rural, you can make it anywhere”. Implicit in his view, is the notion that rural schools with their multiple disadvantages and idiosyncrasies are the ultimate challenge. It became apparent that all participants, when asked in the post-placement interviews, valued the opportunity to gain first-hand experience in rural teaching. One participant, originally from a rural background asserted that “if people were thinking of working in a rural area it would benefit them to go and look at the area first”. She believed that “otherwise it would be a complete shock, just as it would have been for me coming from a rural area to suddenly work in a city school.”

There was a heightened awareness from participants of the uncertainty and precariousness that has permeated the job market within the teaching profession. Even for those pre-service teachers that did not seriously consider taking a rural job before, during and after the placement, job security became a significant issue in making them reconsider their position. The “ability to be put in a leadership position” was another reason to entertain the idea of going rural. Importantly, the possibility to teach in their area of specialization, often defined as “my dream job”, was also affirmed by almost all participants as a powerful reason to decide which school they would like to teach. While these pre-services teachers might have entered the rural teaching experience lacking any rural experience or understanding of the rural teaching context, they

approach the profession with a strong idea of the multiple working opportunities and challenges that lie ahead in rural schools.

Discussion

Overall the longitudinal analysis offers a continuity on pre-service teachers' views before, during and after the rural placement. Thus, in relation to our first research question, introducing pre-service teachers to rural teaching placements enhances their desire to seek a teaching position in a rural school, this was not confirmed in this study. No participant altered their view of applying, or not, for a rural teaching job after completing a five-week rural placement. Participants did find the experience beneficial, as similarly noted in Sharplin's (2009) research into pre-service teachers enrolled in rural field-trips. Overall, the rural placement was generally seen to be positive by all participants and, particularly a "rite of passage" by some in becoming a teacher. However, this notion of a "rite of passage" is problematic because it suggests a hardship in rural teaching, which resonates with the geographical blindness that affects rurality and rural schools, spaces and places as "simply out there" (Green & Letts, 2007).

When we explored factors that might encourage "metro" participants to go "rural", employment security (as little as a two-year teaching contract), and securing jobs within their areas of specialisation were the most common reasons cited as most important. The current employment uncertainty, with increasing short-term casual contracts (see, Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; Pietsch & Williamson, 2010; Productivity Commission, 2012), that pervades the teaching profession could be advantageous for rural schools offering job security to new graduates. Of course, rural schools might need extra funding support from the government to be able to deliver job security for its staff. In addition, placing beginning teachers in "out-of-field teaching" positions will more likely contribute to a higher level of turnover (see Sharplin, 2014). As stated above, "out-of-field teaching" is a significant issue in rural schools and a major contributor for poor staffing (Cuervo, 2012, 2016; Sharplin, 2009, 2014; White et al., 2012). Participants were very clear that securing a job in their field of study, a "dream job", was paramount in the next step in their professional careers. Furthermore, these two issues highlight a heightened awareness of the precariousness of the teaching labour market. Nonetheless, while getting that "dream job" was an important motivator on where to undertake their teaching job, we found that employment security was the strongest motivation for "metro" participants to seriously consider a rural post after completing their graduate studies. We can only speculate that pre-service teachers might think they can adapt to an area of teaching that has similarities with their specialisation but are more concerned with the precariousness of a contemporary labour market and the impact it might have on different dimensions of their lives (e.g. health, personal relationships) (Cuervo & Wyn, 2016).

Interestingly, other positive and negative views of rural teaching that were learned in their urban teacher education classes were to a great extent held throughout the whole study. For instance, small class sizes and strong school-community relationship were praised by all participants, which added appeal to working in rural towns. Contrary to what the literature suggests, the "fishbowl" experience (i.e. high visibility and transparency in the community due to the blurring boundary of school-town activity) (Miller

et al., 2005; White et al., 2011) was not raised by participants as a concern. The relatively short placement experience of five weeks, and the knowledge that they were in the community for a temporary fixed term might have eliminated this concern amongst participants. Overall, all participants in this study were satisfied with their relationship with, and the support from, community members. This kind of relationship between pre-service teachers and rural communities also points out to the intensive emotional labour that rural community members must engage in to attract new professionals to their towns (see Cuervo, 2016).

"Metropolitan" participants, however, commented on the difficulty of having scarce time after school for shopping or other personal affairs, particularly since they had to travel for some of it. On the one hand, the lack of "shopping centres" or "advanced medical facilities" was an issue of concern for "urban" participants. On the other hand, some of these participants, as commented above, enjoyed the friendliness and "slowed down" rhythm of country life. Most importantly, we noted a continuous examination of the rural community and school by all participants through a metrocentric prism. In other words, analysis of what "rural" means and entails are in many instances either romanticised ("friendliness", "slowed down" rhythm of life) or deficient (lacking what a city life has to offer in abundance). We argue that this binary construction is usually sustained by historically and culturally ingrained "ideological myths" which portray the rural space with an idyllic quality of life or as backward step in time (Bourke & Lockie, 2001, p. 8). This is a problematic construction because it defines the rural space as the "other", always in relation to urban spaces. In this kind of analysis, either romantic or deficient, rural spaces are positioned as homogeneous entities located "simply out there" (Letts, Novak, Gottschall, Green, & Meyenn, 2005). Thus, rurality is viewed as a "residual space" that is socially, conceptually and temporally imagined outside the boundaries of modernity and the metropolis (Corbett & White, 2014). The relatively limited duration of the placement, we believe, might also contribute to participants' social imagination of rurality that has "little correspondence with the actual "realities" of rural space and rural life' (Wood, 2011, p. 9). This by no means is a poor reflection on pre-service teachers' imagination but a demonstration of the invisibility of rural content in the teacher education subject content and the limited introduction to rural life that a five-week placement can offer. As Halfacree (2006, p. 48) puts it, ideational and material rural spaces only come into being "through the practices of discursive interaction" (see also Woods, 2011).

What has been missing in participants' view, was any rural content in their teacher education subjects during their pre-placement period. Participants outlined that their subjects were mostly spatially one-dimensional with rural schools absent of any views. While the rural placement served the purpose of what Adie and Barton (2012, p. 13) framed as "ruralisation of the mind", we argue that participants would have benefited from a structured theoretical and empirical literature of what to expect in rural schools rather than just relying on classmates' subjective experiences. In other words, perceptions that contribute to "other" rural life were not challenged in their teacher education subjects.

Our second research question, pre-service teachers from regional or rural backgrounds are more likely to seek a teaching job in rural places than their urban counterparts, was confirmed. The three pre-service teachers who had connections to rural

communities seriously considered a teaching career in rural schools. Their first-hand experiences within rural communities created a familiarity allowing them to imagine a life away from the city. As recent literature suggests, intrinsic factors dominate individuals' predispositions to take up and remain in a teaching post (see Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). We see this rural subjectivity, a way of being and a unique sensibility to the place and space (e.g. landscape was an important factor for the three participants) as intrinsic factors that bring pre-service teachers to a full understanding, acceptance and satisfaction with rural schooling and community. Thus, as can be noted in White and colleagues' (2009) study using Bourdieu's thinking tools, these three "rural" participants revealed a *habitus* (a set of rural dispositions) and *cultural capital* (an appreciation of rural life) that brought them closer than the "metro" participants to feel that they could effectively navigate the *field* (a rural place). This finding correlates with other studies that point out to one's geographical background as a good predictor of potential future rural teachers (e.g. Campbell & Yates, 2011; Lyons, 2009; Somerville et al., 2010). This is an important policy tool to counteract the rural staffing crisis.

However, it needs to be stated that as rural communities are becoming increasingly diverse around the world (see Azano & Stewart, 2015; Corbett, 2016; Cuervo, 2016), students' diversity will demand the same level of teachers' diversity (Cuervo, 2012). Nonetheless, as mentioned above, while the rural placement may not have converted new members to the "rural cause", at least it confirmed in some pre-service teachers that rurality is not their place of choice in the immediate future, which will serve to reduce the high turnover that affects rural schools. It might well be that the placement experience planted a "rural" seed at that time and other social and personal conditions might contribute to its germination in the future.

Conclusion

This study provides an important insight into the motivation and barriers faced by pre-service teachers during their voluntary rural placement experience as part of their Master of Teaching degree. The experiences of the participants draw interesting parallels and distinctions with existing local and international research. One of the significant findings of this study is the persistent deficit view about rural schooling from metropolitan tertiary institutions (Halsey, 2009; White et al., 2011). Furthermore, while the placement enhanced a positive view of working in rural places, the experience was used by the majority of participants as a stepping stone or learning experience to return fully-trained to an urban school. These findings suggest that whilst teacher education programs in urban institutions are providing pre-service teachers with access to rural schools through teaching placements, albeit relatively limited, greater work needs to be done to highlight the need for committed teachers who are willing to look beyond "the experience" and to counteract rural deficit discourses circulating in their curriculum. Furthermore, the lack of "rural education" content in the teacher education subjects and a comparison by participants in this study of teaching experiences through the prism of urban school and life, only contributes to enhance the "othering" of rural life.

Our small sample prevents us from making generalizations; however, consistency of participants' teaching preferences before and after the placement suggests that

incentives from public policies should place the emphasis on supporting graduate teachers from rural and regional areas in gaining and retaining jobs in rural schools. As this study and previous research has shown, they seem in the short term to be the best solution to this perennial problem.

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