



Preparing preservice teachers for rural and remote schools: Is classroom readiness enough?

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Abstract

Staffing rural and remote (RR) schools in Australia is an ongoing issue. Universities and schools need to investigate preparing preservice teachers for teaching in such contexts. The aim of this research is to describe preservice teachers' perspectives of their readiness for teaching in RR schools within four constructs, namely: self, classroom, school, and community. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken to investigate preservice teachers' (n=6) experiences for teaching in RR contexts within these constructs as a result of their in-school experience. Findings indicated that despite little holistic induction processes, these preservice teachers reported they were supported to varying degrees across the constructs. Five of the six participants had a sense of belonging and connectedness (self), all were provided with pedagogical support, in particular behaviour management (classroom), most had understandings about systems and procedures (school), and there were general understandings about the communities' roles in school settings (community). The four constructs present a model with a potential lens for structuring teacher readiness for teaching in RR schools with self (e.g., wellbeing, self-efficacy, psychological state) at the centre. Developing university-school programs that target the four constructs may help to advance preservice teacher readiness for teaching in RR schools towards addressing teacher shortages.

Keywords: Rural, Remote, Mentoring, Preparedness for teaching, Preparing teachers, Preservice teacher

Introduction

Initial teacher education in Australia attempts to produce confident and competent graduate teachers for teaching in a variety of contexts (Churchward & Willis, 2019). While many graduate teachers are eager to accept teaching positions in cities or coastal regions, there is a shortage of teachers willing to teach in more isolated or rural and remote areas (Downes & Roberts, 2018). School students across Australia need to have equitable education opportunities no matter where they live. This paper advocates for an approach to preparing preservice teachers for teaching in rural and remote (RR) contexts. While reviews into initial teacher education purport the need for classroom ready teachers (e.g., The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG] Craven et al., 2014), this research highlights the need for graduate teachers to be also be self-ready, school ready and community ready for teaching in RR schools. The aim of this research is to explore and describe preservice teachers' perspectives of their readiness for teaching in RR schools within four constructs, namely: self, classroom, school, and community.

Literature Review

Australia is a vast country with the majority of the population living in metropolitan or coastal areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). For many years, research and reviews have recognised the challenges facing RR education and the staffing of schools in these regions (Downes & Roberts, 2018; Halsey, 2018; Paynter & Taylor, 2018; Yarrow et al., 1999). Emphasising the breadth of these challenges, Paynter and Taylor observed, "Many schools located in low socio-economic, regional, rural and remote communities are also experiencing challenges in recruiting teachers for the breadth of learning phases and curriculum areas" (2018, p. 1). Indeed, educational opportunities for students attending Australian RR schools are not as equitable as other countries (e.g., Canada, New Zealand), particularly with access to qualified teaching staff (Sullivan et al., 2018). Furthermore, the educational outcomes of students attending rural and remote schools in Australia are well below students studying

in metropolitan areas (Herbert, 2020).

Attracting and retaining teachers for positions in Australian RR schools has been a priority for over two decades (Halsey, 2018). Fears of being isolated, concerns about being away from family and friends, the distance between towns and, apprehension about access to shopping centres and high quality medical facilities have facilitated a shortage of teachers in these areas (Herbert, 2020). With many preservice teachers indicating they have never visited RR locations, a number of programs have been initiated to support preservice teachers to undertake professional experience placements in these locations (e.g., Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Queensland Department of Education, 2018; Hudson et al., 2019). Such programs have had positive effects on preservice teacher attitudes for teaching in RR areas. Although graduates may not select to start their teaching careers in these communities, the value of the professional experience in an RR location is deemed to be beneficial for those that do (Young et al., 2018).

White and Kline (2012) advocate that preparing preservice teachers for teaching in RR communities requires them to be school and community ready. By undertaking a placement in such a location allows preservice teachers to experience RR teaching and the influences of the community on the school context. Different ‘places’ have varied communities, often with varied cultural expectations and traditions (Herbert, 2020). Indeed, the role of “place” is recognised as influencing the pedagogical approaches adopted for the classroom (Downes & Roberts; 2017). White and Kline (2012) and Downs and Roberts (2017) confirm the importance of professional experiences for preservice teachers as a way of understanding ‘place’. So, while reviews into initial teacher education (e.g., TEMAG, Craven, et al., 2014) highlight the importance of classroom ready teachers, research suggests that for teaching in RR locations, graduates’ school and community readiness needs to be considered (Kline et al., 2013; White & Kline, 2012).

Mentor teachers play a vital role during professional experience in guiding preservice teachers towards effective practice. For mentor teachers in RR schools, offering support to preservice teachers who may be living away from home during their placement becomes part of their role. Quality mentor teachers in RR schools can guide preservice teachers through the requirements of teaching and provide information about the students and the nature of the school and community to ensure appropriate and responsive pedagogy (Gray et al., 2019). As the preservice teacher experiences success, self-efficacy or confidence to undertake the tasks of teaching can be developed (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Indeed, teaching is contextual, the school and classroom demographics are varied with the community location, values, beliefs and expectations being influential (Kline et al., 2013; White & Kline, 2012). As confirmed by Downs & Roberts (2017), such experiences can promote a more in-depth understanding of living and working in RR communities.

Recent research investigated the experiences of preservice teachers who completed a professional placement in a RR school. From this research emerged the need for these preservice teachers to feel self-ready as well as classroom, school, and community ready (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). Similar to ensuring the health and welfare of school students, the preservice teachers highlighted that experiencing belonging and acceptance impacted on their wellbeing and self-efficacy for teaching. If providers of initial teacher education are to support preservice teachers to be well-equipped to be classroom ready for teaching in RR schools, the role of the school and community context as well as the self-readiness of the preservice teacher needs to be contemplated. The four constructs (self, classroom, school and community) and their development during professional experience are explained in the following discussion.

Self-readiness

Being self-ready for teaching requires the preservice teachers to be psychologically, socially, and physically ready (e.g., McCallum et al., 2017; Paterson & Grantham, 2016; Raea et al., 2017). The preservice teacher needs to be in good health and psychologically capable of managing multiple students at any one time. Self-readiness, as a psychological state for teaching, can include the development of a sense of belonging to a school and its community. Belonging is where the preservice teacher can “feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). An effective professional experience that includes a supportive mentor teacher can support the psychological state and lead the preservice teachers to a sense of belonging in the school (Andrews, 2011).

Preservice teachers’ wellbeing (e.g., health) assists to optimise teaching practices (Fernet et al., 2016) and work recognition can support wellbeing. Many preservice teachers can feel satisfied with school student affirmations of their teaching practices (Berber, 2015; Mahipalan & Sheena, 2019), while collegial and community work recognition may further build the preservice teacher’s psychological state. Many preservice teachers can feel isolated in RR settings, especially when arriving in the first instance away from family and friends (Irving et al., 2017), so the need to feel a sense of social connectedness (belonging) may aid in developing resilience. Effective mentor teachers can help facilitate the development of positive relationships with students, staff, and parents in the workplace to support social connectedness to aid preservice teacher sense of wellbeing (Barber & Schluterman, 2008; Gizir, 2019).

Classroom readiness

As previously mentioned, TEMAG's (Craven et al., 2014) review into initial teacher education in Australia emphasised that graduating preservice teachers need to be classroom ready. TEMAG evidence claims that many universities and schools are not working effectively together and, in relation to poor practices states, "Not all initial teacher education programs are equipping graduates with the content knowledge, evidence-based teaching strategies and skills they need to respond to different student learning needs" (p. xi).

Preparation for teaching in RR contexts requires sound university coursework combined with well mentored professional experiences (Kline et al., 2013; White & Kline, 2012). Such professional experiences can present the unique nature of RR school contexts and can develop the pedagogical skills of the preservice teacher towards classroom readiness (Hudson & Hudson, 2019). During professional experience, mentor teachers can guide preservice teachers towards acquiring deep responsive pedagogical knowledge (e.g., planning, teaching strategies, differentiation, classroom management, assessment) that empowers them towards teaching effectively (Bird & Hudson, 2015; Hudson, 2013). The development of effective teaching practices for teaching in RR schools necessitates an experienced mentor who can guide the preservice teacher's work and facilitate reflection on practice for teaching growth (Mathew & Peechattu, 2017; Sahin-Taskin, 2017).

School readiness

Many school policies and procedures can be daunting for preservice teachers new to a school environment (Butt, 2016). Additionally, every school context is unique with policies and procedures contextually responsive. Australian regulatory authorities (e.g., Queensland College of Teachers) encourage schools to develop school orientation programs followed by induction programs, so preservice teachers understand the layout and working of each school and become comfortable with the differing environments (NSW Government, 2020; Queensland Government, 2020).

For preservice teachers in RR contexts, the mentor teacher or school leadership team can assist with the orientation and induction process (Birch, 2019). The orientation may include the location of resources, materials for teaching, the staff room, toilets and procedures such as playground duty. An induction may include weekly meetings about the school and systems policies, procedures, whole school approaches, the roles of the staff and school demographics (Nallaya, 2016; Wexler, 2019). By understanding the organisation of the school, the policies and procedures as well as the culture and infrastructure, the preservice teacher can be supported to work more productively in the RR school setting (Morris et al., 2019).

Community readiness

Preservice teachers entering a new school need to be aware of the school demographics and how the school community operates. Developing positive teacher-parent/carer relationships can support the preservice teacher's practices, especially helping to address behaviour problems, understanding the social dynamics, and student academic performance (Webster-Stratton & Bywater, 2015). The teacher-parent/carer relationship may be fostered at formal events (e.g., meeting the classroom teacher, Parents and Friends committee) and informal occasions such as sporting events, greeting parents in the morning or afternoon, and within the local community (Bofferding et al., 2016). Once more, the mentor teacher can assist the preservice teacher to make connections with parent/carers and key people in the community providing information to understand the community and its' role in RR contexts. While university coursework can provide information about RR communities, a teaching placement provides real-world experiences (Willemse et al., 2018). Hence, RR professional experiences where the mentor teacher guides the preservice teacher to interact and understand the community can build the capacity of the preservice teachers to be community ready for teaching.

Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) presents a theoretical underpinning for this investigation, which includes the culture and context of the professional experience in constructing the preservice teachers' knowledge and understanding of their RR experience. The tenets of social constructivism were suitable to this study as the preservice teachers constructed meaning through social interactions with their students, school colleagues, parents/carers and their mentor teachers. Multiple responses were expected as a social constructivist approach supports numerous perspectives as each preservice teacher was placed in a different context and had varied teaching experiences and interactions (Nguyen & Williams, 2019).

Self-readiness as one of the proposed requirements for teaching in RR schools, can be explored through an additional social constructivist theoretical framework, as suggested by Bandura (1997) and his work related to self

efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own abilities to successfully undertake tasks (Bandura, 1997). Bandura notes there are four influencing experiences that can support self-efficacy that include:(1) Mastery experiences where the preservice teacher enacts lessons, reflects on practice, and modifies practices; (2) Vicarious experiences where the preservice teacher observes the mentor teacher and other school staff modelling the pedagogy and requirements for teaching; (3) Verbal persuasions where the mentor teacher provides feedback and affirmation to the preservice teacher; and (4) Physiological state involving the preservice teacher’s physical and emotional health as well as their wellbeing (Bandura, 1997).

Additionally, a conceptual framework noting the four constructs (see Figure 1) previously outlined in the research (Hudson & Hudson, 2019) and confirmed in the literature was used in this current study to further investigate preservice teachers’ perceptions of their readiness for teaching with a focus on the four constructs. As depicted in Figure 1 at the centre of this model is self-readiness with classroom readiness (TEMAG, 2104), school readiness and community readiness (White et al., 2012) surrounding self, with all constructs interconnected.

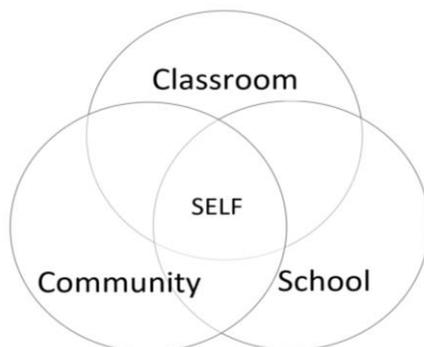


Figure 1: A model for teaching readiness for RR schools: Self, classroom, school, and community.

Method

This small-scale qualitative study aimed to explore and describe preservice teachers’ perceptions of their readiness for teaching in RR schools around four constructs (i.e., self, classroom, school, and community). University ethics approvals were provided with data collected remaining confidential and anonymous. Qualitative data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews from six preservice teachers, which allowed for probes to gain clarification about their experiences and self-reported readiness for teaching (see Edwards & Holland, 2013). The semi-structured interview questions (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018) were based around the four constructs as follows with example questions noted in Table 1.

Construct	Example interview questions
<i>Self</i>	Was your wellbeing supported during your last professional experience? How? Were you provided with work recognition? If so, what and by whom? Did you have a sense of belonging and connectedness to this last school? If so, can you give any examples?
<i>Classroom</i>	Did you discuss lesson plans for teaching? How? What were the outcomes? Did your mentor support you for teaching effectively? How? Any examples? Did you have effective classroom management? Why or why not? Did your mentor help you to reflect on your teaching practices? How, when and how often?
<i>School</i>	How did you develop an understanding of staff and their roles? Were you educated around special programs in the school (e.g., EAL, Learning Support, religious education)? What, how and by whom? What school procedures were useful to you? Who assisted you?
<i>Community</i>	How did you gather an understanding about working effectively with parents/carers? Did you notice benefits associated with parents/careers assisting the school? Any examples? What did you learn about rural and remote communities?

Table 1: Constructs of self, classroom, school and community with example interview questions.

As a recall technique (Morse, 2015), the interviews were conducted within a week of completing their RR professional experiences. Interviews were transcribed and de-identified by a research assistant to ensure participant anonymity, and then hand-coded and analysed by the researchers with responses organised into the four constructs: self, classroom, school, and community. Interview data included demographics about gender, age, RR area, grades taught, and professional experience duration.

Findings and discussion

Qualitative data presented ways to explore and describe preservice teachers' perceptions of their preparedness for teaching. Table 2 outlines the de-identified interview participants' (pseudonym provided) demographics, highlighting gender (1 male, 5 females), ages (range 22-51 years), RR area in Australia, professional experience duration (between 4-6 weeks), grades taught at school, and the interview length (range 18-44 mins; Table 2).

Name (de-identified)	Gender	Age	RR area	Prof Experience	School Grades	Disciplines	Interview length (mins)
Mary	Female	29	Queensland	6 weeks (final)	Yrs 7-12	Media, English	42
Sonya	Female	35	Queensland	4 weeks	Yrs 7 & 8	English	44
Kathy	Female	51	Queensland	4 weeks	Yrs 7-10	English, history, geography	29
*Chad	Male	34	New South Wales	5 weeks	Yrs 4 & 5	All subjects	18
*Cassie	Female	40	New South Wales	6 weeks	Yrs 9, 10, 12	English	24
*Britany	Female	22	Western Australia	6 weeks	Yrs 7 & 8	Human Society and its environment	24

Table 2: Demographics of interview participants

***Participants involved in Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education**

Self ready

Participants indicated their personal readiness for teaching by commenting on their wellbeing, approachability of staff, work recognition received, and their sense of belonging and connectedness to the school. Five of the six participants mentioned their wellbeing was supported in their respective RR schools. In addition, being able to talk with supportive staff seemed to build a sense of belonging. For instance, Mary, a high school preservice teacher said, "I had some really approachable staff around me. I was always included in conversations that were directed within the whole staffroom. It was a very welcoming environment". This suggested Mary was enabled by a school community of informal mentors to build her capacity as a teacher (e.g., Wexler, 2019), and not just "being tied to my mentor". Mary also indicated a sense of belonging and connectedness, "I kind of felt like I was already a part of the crew, so that was really lovely. They often kind of treated me like I was a staff member". The sense of belonging that Mary alluded to is strengthened by the reciprocity inherent in teaching practice. Mary comments, "So some of the things I would be designing for the handful of students that really, really require it, I realised I could do it for the whole class", thus reinforcing Mary's perspective of her role as teacher (as opposed to preservice teacher) and her developing teacher identity. Gray et al. (2019) write about the advantages of feeling like a teacher rather than a preservice teacher, which includes mentors creating a sense of belonging for their mentees. One challenge for Mary was getting to know people (Jenkins et al., 2009) and remembering their names, "I met a lot of people, but it was very hard to remember names and faces". Suggestions for learning the names of staff could include having photos of staff with their names on a digital document.

Sonya was away from her family, which was normally her support group, and said, "my mentor teacher and the staff in the staffroom were very conscious of that... my wellbeing was supported... absolutely it was". Sonya felt very connected to the people at the school, and "loved where I went for my last placement. Not just from the point of view of being accepted by the staff that I encountered, but the students as well. I found I connected really well with them". Indeed, she emphasised her belonging and connectedness to the school, "I felt connected. I felt at home at that school. I felt like I belonged. Not just from an educational aspect but from a personal aspect. I formed really good relationships". In a similar manner to Sonya's comments, Mary reflected on her developing teacher identity. Mary's statement that, "I connected really well with them in the way they knew I was a mum, they knew I had children and they wanted to know more" supports the centrality of positive relationships with staff and students to build a sense of belonging in a RR school environment. Additionally, there was work recognition that came in various forms. For instance, on Sonya's final day of professional experience, she "received a certificate from the principal and the drama staff to say thank you for assisting", which made her feel enthusiastic about her chosen profession. The importance of work recognition (Berber, 2015; Mahipalan & Sheena, 2019) and being supported when feeling isolated as a teacher in a RR community is recognised in the literature (Irving et al., 2017). For Sonya, the support provided by her mentor and the other teachers at the school gave her a sense of efficacy that

she could achieve teaching in this context

Kathy outlined ways in which her mentor supported her wellbeing, including showing her smarter ways to work (e.g., marking, planning, troubleshooting, dealing with unwanted student behaviour), and providing work recognition. “He (mentor) really had my wellbeing first and foremost”. Kathy had a sense of belonging and connectedness mainly because staff would talk with her: “the teachers in the staffroom actually spoke to me like a human being... just their friendliness. All of the things that are so rare in schools now and that’s why I wanted to do a rural placement”. Although considerable research investigates school students’ sense of belonging (Berber, 2015; Mahipalan & Sheena, 2019), there is little around teachers’ sense of belonging, despite the recognition that interpersonal processes can be related to mental health (Hagerty et al., 1996).

Chad had two mentor teachers, one who went on sick leave after three weeks, during which time Chad received no work recognition, followed by another mentor who provided positive comments about his teaching practices, for example: “she (his second mentor) would say how she loved how I managed the class or loved that I would set a standard and would not move from it in terms of behaviour and learning expectations”. As Chad actually lived in this rural community, he said he “was a little bit sad when I left to be honest” at the conclusion of his professional experience. Not unlike Chad, Cassie, who was “born and bred in a rural community” and only worked in RR schools, had three different mentor teachers who “were all very complimentary”; yet she did not feel a sense of belonging or connectedness to the school. However, she indicated a sense of belonging in the staffroom, stating overtly: “I felt the belonging in the staffroom, the staffroom was a great atmosphere, and they were all very inclusive”. Both Chad’s and Cassie’s wider experiences with RR communities seemed to instil and develop a sense of belonging.

Britany said her wellbeing was supported “50/50” as her mentor teacher who “had a lot of days off (found) behaviour management a bit stressful”. Nevertheless, she claimed being able to “reflect and debrief at the end of the week really helps with your wellbeing and trying to find that balance between work and life”. Developing a work-life balance is a challenge for most early career teachers, which can sometimes lead to attrition within the profession (Goodwin et al., 2019). She reasoned, “But it’s full time work, full time school and life somewhere in there”. She also claimed to receive work recognition, particularly with her creative resource making that other teachers wanted to use and with an award from the school principal at the end of her professional experience. In her first long professional experience and first time in a high school as a preservice teacher, she noted that she had a sense of belonging and connected because teachers would chat with her and say, “Hey Britany, and checking in on me... it was really good”.

These preservice teachers noted the importance of belonging during their professional experience. The mentor teachers and/or their associated colleagues in the schools supported the preservice teachers to ensure they felt welcome. While Mary, Sonya, Kathy and one of Chad’s mentor teachers ensured they felt welcome, for Cassie and Brittany it was the other staff in the school. Maslow (1943) highlights that a step towards self-actualisation is a sense of belonging, which supported the preservice teachers to feel motivated for teaching in the RR schools. Arguably, the sense of belonging and self-esteem is provided to a large extent by the positive professional relationships that mentor teachers developed with the preservice teachers. The preservice teachers may have also achieved belonging and self-esteem through social persuasions and affirming feedback provided by the mentor teachers and/or other staff in the school. As a result, it seemed the preservice teachers experienced a sense of wellbeing, belonging and a positive physiological state. McCallum et al (2017) also highlights that wellbeing is linked to resilience and self-efficacy. Experiencing positive social persuasions and a positive physiological state can impact on self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) towards a self-readiness for teaching.

Classroom ready

All the preservice teachers received a level of support from their mentors. Mary commented, “I knew she was always there. If I were to ask a question, she would always be happy to support me at the end of lessons, rather than her telling me what she thought”. Mary would upload her lesson plans to Google Drive as her mentor’s departmental computer did not allow Mary access. The USB (Universal Serial Bus; external data stick) became a medium for transaction, “So, in the end it was flicking her a USB and getting her to have a quick look (at my lessons)”. Teachers in RR schools have considerable planning for classroom lessons, especially planning for differentiation to cater for the range of student needs. Student demographics required considerable differentiation across the six RR schools where the preservice teachers were placed. Mary stated, “We had probably, six or so students with some sort of medical need that required differentiation” for which the school used a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to differentiate learning. In her class there were about “60% of them below a band five, which is the national minimum”, and one class she taught “had 7 or 8 kids with ASD in a class of 24”, so accessing her mentor’s “personal knowledge of the students individually really helped”. Importantly, these preservice teachers reported that their mentors were invaluable for their RR teaching experience. Mary commented that “having such a high concentration of students that were low literacy had challenges... was a bit of a shock to the system, but I think with her (mentor) guiding me I had knowledge of each students’ approach to learning

personally”.

Sonya indicated she worked well with her mentor and together they “talked about the topics and created a term planner for each year level... I had a lot of support, building on that planning stage” and as her mentor teacher was a Head of Department, “we could sit down and talk through things. I did have a lot of time to reflect”. She also commented that as a result of her mentoring she appeared ready for the classroom:

If I was going to be thrown into a classroom now, I'd know how to set up my expectations, I'd know how to deliver my consequences and I'd know how to form relationships with the students to ensure that work was either being achieved or I could tailor my teaching strategies to accommodate for the students' background and whatever needs to be done.

In this study, student behaviour management required mentoring. Mary stated that her mentor guided her with “behaviour management of particular students, strategies to use, and maybe next lesson, why don't we try this with him”. Indeed, all mentors tended to advise their mentees specifically about behaviour management, mainly in keeping with school and their own classroom practices. For example, Kathy references a specific school practice, “If you've got three pink slips which had been sent to the principal for your behaviour”. Behaviour management was a focus for all of these preservice teachers. Working with the mentor to address unwanted behaviour was largely around strategising solutions, such as “tactical ignoring” and “growing a bit of a thicker skin” (Kathy).

Sonya's mentor was upfront with her expectations announcing to her “you're here to learn. This is what my expectations are, here is what you will need to have in place to make it easier for you”. Her mentor would model practices, including assessment, and would use a variety of ways to assist Sonya in her skill development. For instance, she projected on the whiteboard assessment criteria and would use different coloured markers to highlight “levels of achievement or the criteria levels to discuss with students”. These mentoring practices provided Sonya with clear understandings about what to teach and how to teach. Her mentor would offer valuable support when Sonya struggled with teaching practices (e.g., “following through on behaviour management consequences”).

There were stark differences between Chad's two mentors in supporting his classroom readiness. For his first mentor he commented, “I didn't get a lot from her to be quite honest”; however, the second mentor, who was an instructional leader, “was really helpful... we would discuss different ways to improve all sorts of things”. Chad, who had worked as a welfare liaison officer and counsellor in a past role, felt he had reasonable behaviour management strategies. He mentioned that part of his knowledge about managing students comes from being a father with twin boys (2 years of age) and a four-year old son. Chad claimed his second mentor “loved that I am strict, very clear with my expectations and I let them know what my expectations are for each lesson... and that way you can get results”. Not all effective teachers will make effective mentors, and so matching mentors and mentees can make a difference to mentoring relationships (Izadinia, 2016). Chad's first mentor did not appear to be a match for Chad as his mentoring consisted of limited with insufficient conversations about advancing teaching practices. Yet his second mentor seemed more invested in the mentoring processes and provided Chad with feedback towards supporting classroom readiness.

Cassie, being located in a high school had three different mentors, said she received “tips and strategies and access to different content” from her mentors. Despite one mentor providing written feedback for teaching improvements, there was a sense she was not provided with sufficient support for classroom teaching. While Britany's mentor was absent “25-30% of the time”, she said, “I feel like I'm ready to go into the classroom”. Nevertheless, she indicated she had “heaps of feedback” and she “could make those adjustments and make it effective”. Britany appreciated her mentor's professionalism and trust in her own development of lessons, “He just knows if I implement this lesson then it will 100% work and everyone will be engaged, which really helps me”. Both Cassie and Britany had varied mentoring experiences; Cassie with limited support for teaching in the classroom and Britany's mentor's significant absence from the classroom reduced her level of support.

Behaviour management can become an issue for early-career teachers (Izadinia, 2016). Britany, who had previous professional experiences on the Gold Coast in Queensland and claimed she experienced minimal behavioural issues. However, her current RR school had “students who are not afraid to scream and yell and walk out the door” so it was important for her to “learn how to do and handle that”. As Britany reported that her confidence and competence developed towards the end of her teaching experience, she felt she was ready for intensive behavioural issues. To illustrate: “I thought I was really out of my depth to start off with but after practising all of those things, I feel like I've really slotted into where I am supposed to be and what I am supposed to be doing”. A key part of her development as a teacher was being able to verbally reflect with her mentor “every time I finished a lesson... it just really helped me for future lessons”. She overtly stated, “I have adjusted well, I think”.

The role of the mentor teacher in guiding the preservice teacher to develop pedagogical knowledge for teaching is a key practice of mentoring (Mathew & Peechattu, 2017; Sahin-Taskin, 2017). Overall, three (Mary, Kathy & Chad) of the preservice teachers noted some support from their mentor teachers in the development of practices for behaviour management. While Britany received limited mentoring, her confidence in behaviour

management developed through mastery and vicarious experiences (see e.g., Bandura, 1997). As a vicarious experience, Sonya noted that she felt well supported by her mentor teacher who provided clear expectations and modelled practices for teaching. Cassie and Chad had more than one mentor with differing approaches. However, mentoring should be planned and not haphazard (Izadinia, 2016). For Chad, one of his mentors provided him with feedback and conversations he required to further develop classroom readiness. In contrast, Cassie who had three mentor teachers seemed to experience a lack of meaningful feedback for teaching. While she received some support in the way of ideas for content, the overall lack of a planned and consistent mentoring approach appeared to limit her development of classroom readiness. Professional conversations and feedback are practices required of mentor teachers to develop mentees' pedagogical practices (Bird & Hudson, 2015).

School ready

According to the participants, certain staff at the six schools assisted their preservice teachers in aspects of the school system, despite having limited or no induction to the school setting. For example, there was no induction for Mary who said, "Induction program? No! No, no, no. That was the funny thing, and it was like, 'oh do I need to do one?'" Surprisingly, she did not know "there was a swimming pool at the school for the first four weeks. That was pretty funny". Nevertheless, there appeared to be a level of orientation for Mary, who said, "there are definitely support staff around the school that I was introduced to who I could ask about the connections and the community support". There were different ways in which Mary got to know staff within the school, particularly through her mentor teacher. For example, the weekly staff meeting, "where you would see all of this staff that you never knew existed", Mary would "quietly elbow my mentor asking, who is that and who is that and what do they do?" She also mentioned that others would contact her, including the admin staff, teacher aides, and teachers associated with her discipline. Yet, Mary stated that "the most beneficial thing was when we did playground duty. You would be cruising about and whoever else was on duty, you would shake hands, say hello and ask, oh cool what do you teach?" Getting to know the school approaches became a challenge for most of the preservice teachers, especially procedures for behaviour management. Mary indicated her school "used the buddy class system, which in the initial weeks was quite hard for me". However, Mary claimed she did become proficient at the system "which helped me immensely".

Even though departments of education advocate induction processes (e.g., Queensland Government, 2020), many schools did not have such programs to aid a preservice teacher's practices and immediate involvement in the school. Sonya said, "There was never an induction, so I never met deputies or was never told that there were certain personnel in the library who could assist for certain things". However, Sonya was guided by "other staff" on specific programs such as the "English Support Program". Chad also claimed he received no information about school support systems, arguing that it may be a result of his background as a welfare liaison working with children with special needs that perhaps the teachers made assumptions "he would not require this information". Yet, he was provided with school procedures such as an orientation, including "general routine", "bell times", and school behaviour management procedures. Similarly, Cassie developed an understanding of staff and their roles "mainly by osmosis really... attending staff meetings (and being) introduced to the principal and coordinator". Britany also had a lot of staff meetings where they would discuss how to implement effective behaviour management strategies. According to Britany, being involved in programs such as AIM, Individualised Plan for Learning (IPL), and Follow the Dream (for girls) assisted Indigenous students in achieving positive behaviour and helped Britany develop greater understandings around behaviour management.

Teaching is a profession with learners at the centre and, as a result, each school is different depending on the context and needs of the students. Key policies, procedures, school organisation and specialised staff vary from school to school. Providing preservice teachers with information about the size of the school, the culture, students' backgrounds, the roles of various staff, the location of resources and materials can help to influence preservice teachers' school readiness (Nayalla, 2016). While the preservice teachers in this study indicated they found out some school information incidentally, a planned orientation with a sustained induction in the way of strategic meetings would not only help them to transition and understand the school but also understand the wider role of the teacher and the nuances of that particular RR school (Wexler, 2016). Bandura (1997) notes that social persuasions are experiences to support self-efficacy. Orientations that includes a school tour and introduction to staff followed by a planned induction for preservice teachers allows them to understand the various school requirements (NSW Government, 2020; Queensland Government, 2020). Understanding school structures and employment systems supports preservice teachers to experience school readiness (Kline et al., 2013) and can aid a preservice teacher's sense of belonging to the school (Andrews, 2011).

Community ready

As RR schools were unique so too were their communities. Mary's school had 18% Aboriginal and Torres Strait students with "86% of all students in the lowest quartile even though they live in a major rural city". Mary

encountered “a mix of parents who were very supportive” with school contact but other “parents or caregivers would disregard the contact”. She claimed that for most cases, phone contact was probably the most effective. She compared her usual home circumstances with the RR community where it was “so radically different from where I had grown up and where I had gone to school and where I had done previous placements”. One component appeared to be a more holistic community connections with various activities such as “a really great extra-curricular arts event” or a “theatre restaurant where the Year 11 drama students each year put on a performance and the hospitality students run a restaurant for the night”. These events involved staff as well and aided Mary to feel “more equipped with skills” and “definitely taught me a bit about resilience”. Importantly, at the conclusion of her professional experience, Mary stated, “It is just so challenging but so much to learn and so much to always be improving on. It is definitely something I wanted, even just my own personal practice I hope will be developing and changing over time”.

Sonya outlined the diversity of the community and although she “never met any parents as such or saw any on campus”, she said, “It’s a very close (school) community” with teachers knowing all the teachers in other schools nearby, health department professionals (nurses, physiotherapists), and those who work in the mines, “it’s all interconnected (and) the community relies on each other”. As these preservice teachers have minimal if any experience working with parents and carers, there can be an element of fear in having difficult conversations with them. To illustrate Sonya noted,

I did get the chance to call home for a student that was misbehaving in class one day. Not going to lie, thank goodness, they didn’t answer [laughs]. They went home that afternoon, so I didn’t have to go through with that conversation.

Sonya expressed nervousness about communicating with the parent, which signals a lack of training in these specific areas (see also Hudson et al., 2016). Nonetheless, she recognised that forming positive relationships can help to negate difficult situations, “once I have formed those relationships I can get much more out of those students” and calls these advancements a “white gold moment”.

The school can become the hub of a small community with significant involvement from parents and carers. Kathy claimed,

Because it is such a tiny community in the middle of nowhere, the parents, the mums were very involved in the tuckshop and the P&C. You do get to know the mums and dads because they drop the kids off every morning.

Parental involvement was not consistently noted as a positive engagement. In some circumstances, parents may attempt to “overrule” the teacher consequences and “was a bit of a negative for the teachers” (Kathy). In one instance, after several consequences a student’s behaviour had not improved and the main consequence was not attending a waterslide event at the end of the term. However, a parent was not pleased with this action, which created tension between the teacher and parent, making it “very difficult for the teachers to ... enforce consequences”. Kathy made a distinction between her previous remote experience and her last rural experience. “Remote is when you fly in at the beginning of the term. You are stuck there through cyclones, floods, no uprisings in the community until the end of term”. She said that she would not do remote as she needed more resources and people, however “I would definitely do rural”. Kathy was offered a permanent position at the school towards the end of her professional experience.

Depending on the size of the RR community, any newcomer will be noticed. Chad, for example, said “being a small community... I was in the newspaper and I was starting to teach at this school... so everyone was aware that I was doing it anyway. That was a good start”. Chad was welcomed with positive feedback from the community and asserts that newcomers need to be proactive with any “potential issues”. It was relatively easy to make arrangements with parents as there was strong involvement in the school, including reading programs and educational activities. He claimed that “all except for one were quite helpful and constructive” but “you aren’t going to be the right person for everyone”. Chad was a mature-aged student with three children of his own and has “been out in the world for some time”, and explained about any negativity that he does not “really pay attention to outside noise”. He further clarified that it was important not to “bow to that pressure” and ensure that information was relevant for clear decision making. Thus, he relied on feedback from school leaders, including his mentor teacher.

Both Chad and his wife, who is also a teacher, lived in the RR area. He advised that those wanting to teach in RR areas need to “Be prepared to do extra things... because that is the nature of the small school”. He outlined various extras that involved coaching the soccer team, netball team, teaching in the arts such as music, and doing extra duties. He stated, that as a RR teacher you can have a, “smaller class with semi-entitled parents and they expect you to go the extra yard all of the time, everywhere. (However) it’s not as strict, there is a lot more freedom of movement within the role”. Chad said his catchcry was “extra freedom comes with more responsibility”.

The nature of RR schools necessitates telephone communication as a way to access parents and carers. Cassie wanted to learn how to interact with parents and carers and noted that it was “better in that environment to hear teachers interacting with parents in phone conferences”, particularly as she “didn’t see any parents assisting in the school at all”. There were about 60,000 people in this quite large RR community, however, “resourcing was very scarce and problematic”. Cassie stated that there were connections with the town as a resource “but not a lot of excursions and opportunities” beyond the township. The RR teaching experience was valuable for Cassie and she entered into an interview for a teaching position at another local school within the township.

Similarly, Britany was in a RR school with about 750 students in a “close-knit community”, which appears as a “different kind of relationship compared to my other schools where it’s just school and home is separate”. Staff would make contact with parents by phone regularly regarding behaviour management issues, and this “open communication, (made) teachers more approachable”. Britany felt fully supported within the school and wider community saying, “Knowing that I could have contact with anyone at any time when I need help was really beneficial to me”.

In a previous study (Hudson et al., 2016), 30% or more of final-year preservice self-reported a lack of confidence for undertaking tasks such as reporting to parents and carers and working with parents and carers to support students’ learning, mainly as a result of limited experiences. In relation to the tenets of Bandura (1997), the lack of mastery experiences may have impacted on the preservice teachers’ confidence to interact with parents and carers. In this current study, the six preservice teachers experienced interactions with parents in the community. Sonya had not met many parents, while Kathy was surprised at the close-knit community, noting not all parental interactions were positive. Chad and Brittany had opportunities to see or have modelled phone interactions between teachers as well as engagement with parents during tuckshop, excursions and extra-curricular activities. Despite the varying contexts, all six preservice teachers gained experience in working with the community and particular parents and carers. In RR contexts, the school can be at the centre, thus understanding the community in RR settings will assist preservice teachers to be community ready (Kline et al., 2013). The preservice teachers constructed knowledge through social interactions with parents and carers (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). Importantly, Green & Reid (2004) argue that ‘teacher education—like education research as well as schooling itself—should always be understood as situated practice’ (p 255). This is especially true in regards to teacher education that is situated in rural schools and communities.

Conclusion

TEMAG (2014) proposed that preservice teachers should be classroom ready at the completion of their degree. Kline et al. provided evidence that classroom, school and community readiness needed to be considered for teaching in a RR school. More recently a fourth construct has emerged that highlights that preservice teachers need to be self-ready or psychologically, socially, and physically prepared with a sense of wellbeing for teaching (e.g., McCallum et al., 2017; Paterson & Grantham, 2016; Raea et al., 2017). Figure 1 provided the conceptual framework for this study that unites the constructs of self, classroom, school, and community readiness. While each construct is interconnected, self-readiness is positioned as central to teacher readiness (McCallum et al., 2017).

The preservice teachers perceived teacher readiness across the four constructs (self, classroom, school, and community). Each of the preservice teachers undertook placement in a different RR school context and highlighted the importance of professional experiences for teacher readiness, particularly being valued and supported by school staff to encourage their sense of belonging and wellbeing. Mentor teachers provided information about school students and effective pedagogical approaches for supporting the preservice teachers’ classroom readiness. However, inconsistency of mentoring approaches was reported by preservice teachers who had more than one mentor; nevertheless, they seemed to gravitate towards the mentor teacher who was most approachable and provided the strongest and most supportive professional relationship.

Professional experiences in RR schools provide a context for developing teacher readiness across the four constructs. Understanding the school context, (or the “situated practice” (Green & Reid, 2004), such as school size, roles of the different staff, and various policies and structures appeared to assist the preservice teachers’ readiness for teaching. Formal orientations and induction programs are advocated by education systems and universities; yet these preservice teachers reported no induction. By facilitating structured orientations and weekly induction meetings, preservice teachers can be further supported towards teacher readiness. It can be speculated that the provision of a structured orientation and induction is an additional organisational burden in smaller rural schools. That said, the indications are that the benefits of a structured orientation and induction are reflected across each of the four constructs of the model (Hudson & Hudson, 2019) referred to in this paper. The preservice teachers indicated the important role community plays along with positive interactions with parents and carers, including phone conversations and face-to-face interactions at school, which assisted towards community readiness.

Mentor teachers have an essential role for developing teacher readiness (including self, classroom, school, and community readiness). Preservice teachers can socially construct knowledge for teaching in RR contexts and gain vital experiences that contribute to their self-efficacy for teaching. Mentor teachers can facilitate opportunities

for preservice teachers to feel a sense of wellbeing and belonging, along with information about the classroom, school context and how to interact with the community. While this study has limitations in terms of the number of participants, it confirms the need for Universities and departments of education to collaborate to promote RR professional experiences and support mentor teachers to facilitate preservice teacher readiness, including self, classroom, school, and community readiness. Through this collaborative approach, preservice teachers may accept teaching positions in RR contexts as a way forward towards overcoming staff shortages currently experienced in RR schools.

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