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Enhancing Rural Internships: Considering the Post-Intern Voice

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Abstract

A lingering issue that has faced rural-practicum planners across all the professions relates to enhancing the overall quality of rural internships. In this report, the authors address a key facet of this subject by considering the viewpoint of post-interns regarding their own rural practicum experiences. The authors compare the perspectives of a recent group of Education post-practicum students regarding the quality of rural internships with findings from previous research related to the subject. The post-interns participating in the present study recently completed their 16-week extended practicum in rural schools in one Western Canadian province. They submitted written responses to questions soliciting their views of the positive and negative aspects of the experience. The authors explore implications of these results for practicum administrators wishing to strengthen rural internship programs in their jurisdictions.

Society delegates to the professional schools, through their various educational programs, the task of preparing its physicians, lawyers, engineers, teachers, social workers, and other professionals (Goodlad, 1984; Ralph, 2010). Urbanization is increasing on a global scale; and yet, half the world's population still resides in rural areas (United Nations, 2010). Furthermore, post-secondary educational institutions are under constant pressure to prepare increasing numbers of qualified personnel to fulfill society's needs for the services that practicing professionals provide, in urban and rural locations, alike (Lapointe, Dunn, Tremblay-Côté, Bergeron, & Ignaczak, 2006; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010). Typically, most professional graduands prefer to work/live in metropolitan regions (Wilson et al., 2009); however, rural leaders are faced with the perpetual challenge of recruiting and retaining professionals to work and live in these communities.

The practical or clinical portion of these preparatory programs conducted in real-world settings has proved to be a key component in the preparation of prospective practitioners to enter their respective professions (Neville, Sherman, & Cohen, 2005; Shulman, 1998). Educators who administer these practicum/internship programs continually attempt to improve them, which in turn, has spawned a sizeable body of research on professional practicum programs. On the other hand, the number of studies related specifically to the rural practicum is considerably lower.

Purpose of the Study

In order to help reduce this research gap regarding the rural practicum in teacher education, we conducted the present study that examined post-practicum students' assessment of the extended practicum that they had just completed in rural schools. We believe that the student voice is critical for educational stakeholders to consider as they seek to enhance the effectiveness of the practicum portion of professional education programs (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Our central research question was, "What were post-interns' assessments

regarding the quality of their rural-based extended-practicum experience?” Two related sub-questions were: “What was most positive about the rural internship?” and “What was most negative?”

Related Research

Because of the relative scarcity of research investigating students’ opinions of their rural internships, we were able to retrieve only a few studies, from which we synthesized a set of common findings. We report these results in the following sub-sections: the first involving rural internships in professional disciplines other than teacher-education, and the second dealing directly with rural practica in teacher education.

Rural Internships in Various Professions

We retrieved ten articles, reports, or book chapters that represented seven professional disciplines in six countries, which dealt in some way with interns’ or novice practitioners’ views of the rural internship or extended-practicum experience. We first extracted common themes, categories, or patterns that emerged from our analysis of these sources (Best & Kahn, 2006); and we report them, below, in terms of the benefits and limitations of rural internships in the non-Education sector. These data reflect the descriptions of post-practicum students or neophyte practitioners, who disclosed their observations and sentiments regarding their lived experiences in rural placements. Among these 10 documents was one chapter in a Canadian book that mentioned rural internships in Social Work (Charles & Dharamsi, 2010), and a second chapter (Ralph, 2010) compared post-practicum students’ perspectives from three fields (Education, Engineering, and Nursing). Another Canadian article (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008) referred to rural internships in Engineering. Two U. S. reports dealt with rural internships in Nursing (Stuart-Siddall et al., 1985) and Mass Communication (Donald, 1993); while two Australian studies addressed rural practica, one in Dentistry (Johnson & Blinkhorn, 2011) and the other in Medicine (Sen Gupta, Murray, McDonell, Murphy, & Underhill, 2008). The remaining three sources treated different facets of rural placements for: Pharmacy in Ukraine (Anzenberger, Popov, & Ostermann, 2011); and Medicine in South Africa (Igumbor & Kwizera, 2005) and the United Kingdom (Deaville, Wynn-Jones, Hays, Coventry, McKinley, & Randall-Smith, 2009).

We categorized the data from these sources according to positive and negative features of rural internships, as reported by participants from the seven professions. The positive aspects were: the welcoming, friendly community atmosphere; the abundant opportunities to engage in rich and varied activities; the relatively relaxed pace/lifestyle; the pastoral serenity of the setting; the feeling of team-camaraderie in genuinely contributing to the welfare of the community; and the benefit of residing in the community and not having to commute daily. On the other hand, the drawbacks identified were: the extra expense incurred for travel and accommodation; the occasional feeling of isolation/loneliness due to being away from family and friends; the limited professional support/resources; inconsistent placement procedures; the restricted availability of social/entertainment outlets; the limited opportunities for future jobs; and the invasion of privacy.

Rural Internships in Teacher Education

For teacher education, we also found ten studies related to post-interns' assessment of their rural practicum experiences. These sources represented three countries: five reports from Canada (Goodnough, 2009; Lemisko & Ward, 2010; Ralph, 2000, 2002, 2003); three from Australia (Boylan, n.d.; Hemmings, Kay, & Kerr, 2011; Sharplin, 2002); and two from the United States (Blackmore & MacNair, 1971; Savelsbergh, 1995). Our synthesis of the data from these reports revealed a similarity to the finding from the other professions. For instance, the results from the Education studies highlighted the following advantages ascribed to rural internships: experiencing a sense of genuine belonging emanating from the welcoming community; receiving substantial support from staff/community; enjoying the relatively restful state of rural living; having access to a wide variety of available activities; having smaller school/class enrollments permitting teachers to provide more individualization; being able to become better acquainted with students/families; presenting possible future job opportunities; and encountering fewer student-discipline problems.

The disadvantages of rural internships that emerged from our data analysis were also similar to those reported by the other professions. These limitations were: a lack of resources and/or professional support; a sense of isolation; an added expense for housing and travel; a lack of privacy; a lack of prior orientation to the rural way-of-life; the limited social activities/amenities; the narrow worldview that seemed to characterize the whole community; and the work overload (e.g., teaching multi-grade classes, or having multiple coaching duties).

Research Methodology

Seventeen members of the cohort of 25 interns anonymously submitted completed surveys, on which no identifying information was recorded. The cohort had completed the extended-practicum in rural schools under the mentorship of one of the authors (who served as one of 14 College-based internship facilitators assigned to the approximately 320 interns who completed their internship in the fall semester of 2011). The cohort was placed within 14 rural schools in five rural school districts in one Western Canadian province. The cohort consisted of 21 females and 4 males, and was representative of the College's annual group of teacher candidates assigned to the compulsory 15-credit extended-practicum program. The cohort was also representative of the total College student population, in terms of: the variety of grade levels and subjects taught; the mix of the interns' major and minor teaching specializations; and the range of sizes of school in which they interned.

At the completion of the practicum, we invited post-interns to complete a written survey that asked: (a) What do you see as most positive about interning in a rural school? and (b) What has been most negative? Respondents' confidentiality was preserved, because they were instructed to place no identifying demographic information on the surveys. We then collated and analyzed their responses using the "constant comparative" technique (see, for example, Mills, 2010), in which an inductive analysis of the data was conducted (Best & Kahn, 2006). Using this approach, we engaged in a process of systematically categorizing and re-categorizing the responses, according to emerging patterns or themes from the data. These evolving categories gradually formed a framework for communicating the essence of how the interns perceived their practicum experiences (see, for example, McMillan & Schumacher, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

We found that, in general terms, the majority of advantages and disadvantages reported by the teacher candidates were similar to those identified both in the previous teacher-education research and in the literature for the other professions as well. However, there were a few variations, which we discuss below.

Advantages

With respect to the positive aspects, the 2011 cohort wrote comments that produced the following categories, arranged in terms of frequency of responses (greater to lesser):

- a sense of community
- support from staff/community;
- opportunity to develop a closer acquaintance with one's students and their families;
- smaller classes and being able to engage in a wider variety of school- and community-based activities;
- greater possibility of being considered for a future teaching position
- time for professional preparation and reflection
- fewer discipline problems
- less expensive accommodation

The differences between these categories and those from the previous teacher education research seemed to lie in the varying emphasis placed by the cohorts on each item. For instance, we found that the 2011 cohort was unanimous in mentioning both the tangible sense of community pervading their rural placements, and the strong support provided by their staff/community. These same two categories, although present in previous studies, did not seem to have the same degree of widespread support reported by the recent cohort.

A comparison of the current list of advantages with that identified by the other professions also showed similar results. However, one aspect identified by the non-Education personnel, which was not prominent in the earlier and current Education studies, was that the former highlighted being able to reside in the rural community rather than having to commute a lengthy distance to/from their residences. In fact, as shown below, the Education post-interns identified having to commute as being disadvantageous.

Disadvantages

The 2011 cohort of Education post-interns identified the following negative aspects of their rural practicum experiences (arranged from more to less frequently mentioned):

- the additional expense incurred either in commuting to/from the school or in renting accommodation in the placement community
- the scarcity of professional resources and services
- the sense of isolation/loneliness in being absent from support groups/families
- a lack of privacy in the community
- the added responsibilities (e.g., coaching, supervision, extra-curricular)
- uncomfortable living accommodations
- the sense of not feeling part of the staff/community

As was the case for the positive aspects, a comparison of the drawbacks identified for

rural internships among all three research sources showed an overall agreement across the lists, particularly between those for the Education results. Again, a key difference between these two Education sets was related to the frequencies of the categories mentioned by cohort members. However, one of the two minor disadvantages identified within the earlier Education studies, which were not mentioned by any respondent in the 2011 cohort, referred to the apparent lack of diversity within school/community philosophies. Apparently, some post-interns from the earlier cohorts expressed the view that rural communities seemed somewhat closed, narrow, or uniform in their worldview/outlook (Ralph 2000, 2002, 2003). They also expressed some dissatisfaction with the lack of a pre-orientation for interns regarding rural living.

With respect to comparing the disadvantages enumerated by the Education post-interns with those identified in the literature of the other professions, we also found only minor differences. For instance, the non-Education research reported one aspect not mentioned by the former, namely, limited future job opportunities. Perhaps the aspiring teachers did not view this particular issue as problematic, as did some members of the other professions. Another difference involved the fact that some Education post-interns in both the 2011 cohort and previous studies apparently saw the additional extra-curricular and coaching responsibilities in rural schools in negative terms. The non-teachers, on the other hand, did not seem to consider the workload factor as a drawback, but rather saw their contributions as genuinely helping the community. Other research (e.g., Anzenberger et al., 2011; Igumbor & Kwizera, 2005) has indicated that people from across the professions, who have had prior experience in rural settings (such as having grown up in rural areas), tend to more readily accept the fact that the community expects everyone, including the professionals, to wholeheartedly share the load of performing extra responsibilities as a normal part of rural life. Nevertheless, it should be noted that only a very few respondents from the teacher-intern cohorts expressed hesitation about engaging in the additional activities. The vast majority of interns readily accepted the challenge, and in fact appeared to enthusiastically embrace the extra duties.

Implications and Concluding Thoughts

Before discussing implications of these findings and presenting a set of possible suggestions related to enhancing rural internships, we wish to acknowledge a limitation of this present study, which is common to other qualitative research studies. We investigated only one cohort, thus limiting its generalizability to other situations (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). However, as recognized by research experts in the social sciences, this generalization problem could reasonably be re-framed using the concept of *transferability* (Donmoyer, 1990). This term means, for instance, that leaders from similar settings could freely consider the results we present in this article, in order to gain possible insights to help them inform or interpret the operation of their own programs (Best & Kahn, 2006).

Nevertheless, we anticipate that the university and the rural school divisions, who organized and conducted the rural internships directly involved in this study, may derive the most value from these findings. However, we believe that other educational leaders with interests in advancing rural practica may benefit from our research. That is, by heeding the student voice (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), we contend that internship organizers will want to continue their quest to achieve two relatively simple goals: (a) to maintain and/or enhance the positive features that have been identified; and (b) to reduce and/or eliminate the negative aspects.

With regard to the possible next steps to be taken by educational stakeholders, we offer five recommendations based on the research findings and their implications for enhancing future programming in rural internships (Boylan, n.d.; Savelsbergh, 1995; Sharplin, 2002). One implication we draw from the findings of the multi-year research across the disciplines is that many of the negative aspects and concerns (e.g., isolation, lack of resources, costs of travel/accommodation, cultural differences) have been chronically pervasive, but that they could be reduced. This reduction would occur if pre-interns, especially neophytes with no previous rural background, received prior preparation and/or direct rural experience/exposure. For instance, Blackmore & MacNair (1971) and Donald (1993) advised organizers to be more deliberate in providing pre-orientation sessions for all interns assigned to rural placements, in order to pre-alert them to the possible situations that might arise. During these sessions, research findings such as described in this article could be shared and discussed; and former rural-interns could be invited to share their experiences, and offer advice to their peers on how to succeed.

Part of this prior preparation organized by the universities could also include the offering of credit courses directly applicable to the rural educational scene, such as *Teaching in Multi-Graded Classrooms*. For example, one of us has taught such a course for several years at our university, and has found that several pre-interns, who took this course prior to their internship, reported that they found it beneficial, in that it had boosted their professional and personal confidence and competence, and that it had helped reduce their initial fears of having been assigned to a combined-grade placement.

Furthermore, both the university and the rural school divisions could collaborate to help alleviate rural-interns' extra financial burdens (accruing from increased travel and rural accommodation costs, the tuition fees for the 15-credit "practicum course," and the expense to retain their city accommodation until they returned from internship). For instance, the university could offer rural interns a tuition reduction, and *all* rural school divisions could follow the example of some districts who offer their interns a monthly stipend (e.g., \$150-\$200) to assist them in defraying expenses (Ralph, 2002, 2003). Moreover, the university and school divisions could further cooperate to re-institute a practice that had been adopted in some jurisdictions, which was to establish and maintain an up-to-date listing of accommodation contacts near each rural school. By receiving this list at the initial orientation session, interns could make housing arrangements well ahead of time.

A third recommendation derived from the implications of the research is that both the university and the rural school divisions could co-operate to recruit, train, and reward the mentor teachers in a more deliberate way. Although some of our research has shown that most interns and their co-operating teachers are matched appropriately, there are some pairings that could be enhanced (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010; Ralph & Walker, 2011). Such incentives as providing free mentorship workshops or granting graduate course-credit to teachers who mentor interns would help make internship supervision more attractive to potential mentors, rather than being seen as a necessary but burdensome obligation.

A fourth implication deals with rural school divisions' ongoing challenge of attracting, recruiting, and hiring new teachers each year. We endorse an initiative recently introduced by one rural school division with whom we work, whereby the hiring superintendents conduct preliminary job interviews near the end of the internship term with *all* interns placed in their schools (E. Brockman, personal communication, December 20, 2011). Not only does this effort offer an actual interview experience to interns, but it provides the school district with a group of possible candidates from which to arrange follow-up interviews and eventual position offers in

the future.

Another implication that arises from the data indicating a lack of resources is related to how stakeholders could collaborate to eliminate this disadvantage (Ralph, 2003). Possible solutions to help reduce this gap are: (a) to increase the appropriate use of electronic media and technology (Jamieson-Proctor, Finger, & Albion, 2010); and (b) to consolidate the current provisions by several library systems (e.g., the university, the college, the provincial/state ministry of education, the regional/local libraries, and the provincial/state teacher union resources) to co-ordinate the mailing materials to/from interns in the field on a postage-free basis.

We conclude with a statement written by one of the post-interns from the 2011 cohort. We believe that this response captures the very essence of the integrated efforts that all stakeholders are striving to maintain in order to promote effective rural education. It was presented as advice to new interns embarking on their upcoming rural internship experience: “Embrace the uniqueness of this opportunity! Not too many schools can say that every teacher knows every student, nor care enough to know what is going on in every student’s life!”

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