Internships in Rural Schools: Post-Interns' Views

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Abstract

This study extends earlier investigations conducted by the authors in one Canadian province regarding the views of post-interns in a teacher-education program who completed their 16-week extended-practicum in rural schools. The authors summarize interns' responses to a survey soliciting intern perspectives of the advantages, disadvantages, and advice to prospective interns with respect to doing their internship in rural settings. The authors compare the current findings with those from the previous studies, and found similarities between the views of the earlier and later cohorts.

For example, both cohorts identified many of the same positive aspects (e.g., the tangible sense of community; the supportive and relaxed atmosphere; and the ease of becoming acquainted with their students and students' families). Likewise, the two cohorts generated similar listings of negative aspects (e.g., the expense incurred, the lack of professional resources, and the separation from family/friends). However, the authors also report variations between the sets of findings from both cohorts, in that percentages of respondents from the two cohorts were not identical for each aspect. The authors draw implications from this synthesis for stakeholders from any discipline, with an interest in enhancing the professional practicum in rural settings.

Keywords: Experiential learning; extended practicum; internship; rural schools; student teaching.

The internship experience forms a key component of the pre-service preparation of practitioners across almost all professional disciplines (Domask, 2007). During this practicum/clinical phase, prospective practitioners are placed within real-world settings under the guidance of mentors/supervisors, who help the protégés develop their professional knowledge and skills (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010). With respect to internships in teacher-education, neophyte teachers learn to teach during an extended-practicum session, which in the case of this study was a four-month period from September to December. These internships occur within actual school environments, under the joint-mentorship of a classroom cooperating-teacher and a university-based

advisor, variously called a supervisor, facilitator, coach, or mentor (Cochran & Zeichner, 2005). However, because limited research exists regarding internships in rural schools, the authors hoped to reduce this gap. The studies conducted spanned a 13-year period, in which the views of several cohorts of post-interns who had completed an extended practicum in rural schools in a Western Canadian province were solicited and analyzed. This internship was the key experiential-learning component (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) of their teacher-certification program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to gather data provided by one cohort of post-interns who completed their extended-practicum in 2011 (identified as the *recent* cohort), and for which one of the authors was the college-based facilitator (or mentor/supervisor). At the conclusion of their internship experience the post-interns were invited to respond in writing to three questions: **(a)** What were the positive aspects you experienced in the rural internship? **(b)** What were the negative aspects? and **(c)** What message/advice would you offer future interns regarding rural practicum placements? The responses were analyzed and compared to similar data that had been previously collected from five groups of post-interns that had completed internships between 1998 and 2002, identified as the *earlier* cohort. The findings were presented to the university-based and school-district (or school-division) stakeholders, who participated in the internship program offered through the College of Education at the university where these studies were conducted. The stakeholders may use these data to help inform their efforts toward enhancing future rural internships. This research may also assist school-district administrators seeking to improve their teacher recruitment/retention efforts and thereby advance the overall quality of education offered in rural schools.

Both cohorts identified many of the same positive aspects (e.g., the tangible sense of community; the supportive and relaxed atmosphere; and the ease of becoming acquainted with their students and students' families).

Review of the Literature

In previous years, Canada's Prairie Provinces have witnessed increased urbanization, substantial governmental financial cutbacks, economic downturns in the agricultural and related sectors, and the consequent decline of rural populations. Until recently, a rural-urban gap existed in that rural areas, compared to their urban counterparts, had experienced declines in employment opportunities, new housing, economic expansion, school enrolment, student achievement, teacher recruitment, and high school course availability (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). Consequently, educational stakeholders in these provinces have attempted to deal proactively with these issues. For instance, provincial governments have adopted legislation and modified policy to support the consolidation and amalgamation of school divisions (Noonan, Hallman, &

Scharf, 2006). Also, rural school divisions have sought to adjust by creating multi-grade classrooms, closing the smallest schools, re-aligning school bus routes, or incorporating itinerant staff assignments (Kirk, 2008).

More recently, however — especially in the province of Saskatchewan — there has been an increase in economic activity and a related reduction in this urban/rural gap, which in turn has led to a reversal of the decline and a resurgence of expansion in some rural areas (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011). The need to hire teachers in both rural and urban divisions will continue because of the following factors: the number of teachers reaching retirement age is increasing and will need to be replaced; the number of teacher-candidates entering teacher-education institutions is not increasing; and the majority of graduating teachers typically favouring teaching positions in larger metropolitan centres, more than those in rural areas (Ralph, 2003). Consequently, both rural school divisions and teacher education institutions will be prudent to encourage neophyte teachers to apply for teaching jobs outside of the urban centres.

Previous research. The amount of research regarding rural internships is scant. For instance, a recent search of the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database on the topic of *rural internships* identified 20 possible sources, only four of which were somewhat pertinent to the present study in examining the experiences of student-teachers doing their practicum in rural settings. The few earlier studies were found to yield similar results. For example, Borys et al. (1991) reported nine key benefits accruing to rural school divisions, to the faculty of education, and to practicum students, as a result of participating in one collaborative school-university partnership that jointly delivered an effective practicum program. Two of these benefits were that student teachers received bursary support and assistance in finding housing in their placement, and that the school division capitalized on this collaboratively conducted practicum to recruit new teachers for its schools.

Furthermore, Hemmings, Kay, and Kerr (2011) conducted research for several years in remote rural schools in Australia, which showed that student teachers were generally positive about both their rural teaching and living experiences, and that they were willing to teach later in similar locations. Also in Australia, Meiklejohn and Barrett (1994) found that novice teachers in rural communities witnessed the close relationships that develop between rural teachers and their students.

North American research on rural practica has not been extensive (Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Ralph, 2000). However, that situation seems to be changing, as shown by subsequent events that have emerged in the field, such as: **(a)** the call for more widespread research on preparing new teachers for rural teaching (as exemplified in the website focusing on rural education recently created by Wallin (n.d.) from the University of Manitoba); **(b)** a growing interest across the professional disciplines in the importance of experiential learning and practicum programs (Goodnough, & Mulcahy, 2011; Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2010) and in the mentoring/coaching process accom-

panying such programs (Ralph & Walker, 2011); and (c) the increased interest shown by such groups as the Canadian National Congress on Rural Education, now in its 17th year (National Congress, 2012).

In studies of teacher-interns completing their extended-practicum in rural schools in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003) reported that several advantages and disadvantages of rural teaching cited by the interns were similar to those expressed by urban interns. Most of the concerns identified were common to all beginning teachers, regardless of their placement. These concerns typically reflected novice teachers' levels of concern revealed in previous research on beginning teachers' experiences (Ralph, 2002; Smith & Sanche, 1992). These three general stages were: (a) concern for "self" ("Will the students like me?"), (b) concern for "task" ("Will I have effective classroom management?"), and (c) concern for "others" ("Will the pupils learn what I am teaching them?").

The elements that Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003) identified as being distinctly "rural" were often related to non-school factors, such as interns being able to secure suitable living accommodations for the practicum, interns incurring extra expenses for travel to and from the rural location during the practicum, or the lack of access to instructional resources and/or cultural/leisure/entertainment venues, compared to the ease of access in the urban areas. This present study explores some of these issues a decade later.

The Provincial Demographics

The present study was conducted, as were the earlier ones (Ralph, 2000, 2002, 2003), under the auspices of the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, one of the two university teacher-education institutions in the province of Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan is the sixth largest of Canada's 10 provinces in terms of population, having approximately 1.1 million people--about 180,000 of whom are students in the Province's K-12 school systems (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011; Saskatchewan Ministry, 2010).

Approximately 37% of Saskatchewan's citizens live in rural and remote areas, while the remainder resides in its 13 cities (urban centers with a population of 5,000 or more). Fifty-four percent of the approximate 720 K-12 schools in the province are located in the rural and northern areas (in towns, villages, hamlets, or on aboriginal/band lands) enrolling approximately 47% of the province's total student population. The urban areas, which contain approximately 46% of the province's schools, hold nearly 53% of the total student enrollment (Saskatchewan Ministry, 2010).

The Extended-Practicum

Each year the College of Education, which the teacher candidates mentioned in the present study attended, places approximately 350 teacher-interns in provincial and band-controlled K-12 schools during their final year of the teacher education program.

The teacher-interns are placed in urban and rural schools in the province to complete a four-month extended practicum under the joint mentorship/supervision of a classroom cooperating teacher and a college-based facilitator. Each faculty facilitator/mentor works with several pairs in a specific geographical location. Past placement statistics from the College indicated that approximately 54% of teacher-interns do their extended-practicum in urban schools and 46% are placed in rural schools each year.

Method

Subjects. The recent cohort of interns surveyed in this present study, as well as the five cohorts in the earlier studies, completed the extended-practicum in rural schools under the mentorship of one of the authors in the fall semesters, respectively, of 2011, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002. The recent (2011) cohort members were placed in 14 rural schools in five school districts, while the five earlier cohorts had been placed in 43 different schools located in 33 rural communities throughout the province. The recent cohort consisted of 21 females and 4 males, while the earlier five cohorts had 68 females and 18 males, which altogether yielded a female/male ratio of approximately 4:1. Each cohort in the studies was representative of the College's annual enrollment of the approximately 350 interns completing their internship. The cohorts were 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.

Procedure

At the completion of the practicum, post-interns were invited to complete a written survey that consisted of three open-ended questions: **(a)** What were the positive aspects of interning in a rural school? **(b)** What were the negative aspects? and **(c)** What advice would you give new interns regarding doing the internship in rural schools? Confidentiality was preserved, because they were asked to place no identifying demographic information on the surveys.

The responses were collated and analyzed using the "constant comparative" technique (Mills, 2010) in which an inductive analysis of the data was conducted (Best & Kahn, 2006). Using this approach, a process was engaged in 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 (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009).

In order to help verify the validity of these data, a triangulation procedure was incorporated in which the survey results were compared with data derived from other relevant sources (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). These additional sources were: **(a)** the oral comments noted among interns and teachers during school post-conferences and in

informal conversations with the authors; (b) the college mentor's regular observations of, and participation in, casual conversations between/among several interns and/or cooperating teachers that occurred at the internship in-services and at the interns' schools; and (c) previous related research (Davidson, 2011: Meiklejohn & Barrett, 1994). The data were summarized in tabular format, as described in the following section.

Findings and Discussion

Advantages of teaching in rural schools. The values in Table 1 summarize the views of the recent cohort and those of the five earlier cohorts surveyed a decade earlier. Although both groups identified a similar listing of advantages, one key difference is observable. This difference was that the percentages for most of the recent cohort were considerably higher than those for the earlier group. This higher agreement among the recent interns may be indicative that both the College and the rural school divisions have been recently seeking to strengthen rural internships than they had been a previously (Lemisko & Ward, 2010; Ralph 2000, 2002, 2003).

Table 1.

Summary of Post-Interns' Responses Identifying Advantages of Interning in Rural Schools.

Advantages	2011-2012 (n=16)	Cumulative (n=101)
1. Tangible sense of community	100	62
2. Supportive, relaxed climate among staff/community	100	60
3. Close acquaintance with students	65	67
4. Low enrollments	44	20
5. Opportunity to engage in variety of activities	44	21
6. Close acquaintance with families	38	23
7. Opportunity to secure a rural teaching position	13	5
8. Time for professional reflection/preparation	13	2
9. Inexpensive accommodation	6	1
10. Few discipline problems	6	10

Note. Values are rounded and represent percentage of respondents who identified advantages in their written comments. The cumulative sum includes five previous cohorts mentored/supervised by one of the authors during the 1998-2002 period, as documented in Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003).

With respect to the values for item #3, this advantage was presumably deemed by both cohorts to be evident and highly esteemed. For item #10, the 2011 cohort did not apparently rate that aspect as important as the earlier group did. This change seems to be in accord with recent American research that has shown that parents, for instance, have tended to rank the maintenance of student discipline in school as being gradually less problematic than had been the case in previous years (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010).

As the content of Table 1 shows, the interns were in strong agreement regarding the function of the phenomenon of "the smaller community." For instance, one intern stated: "The town was very welcoming, and I liked the close-knit community that accepted me." Another intern wrote: "I had lots of community connections, and had a good relationship with the parents."

Because of the close-knit community relationship that tended to emerge in rural areas, where people meet both in formal and informal settings, nearly all of the respondents commented that the increased social interaction and community participation promoted knowing the students and their families better, which in turn led to bolstering mutual school-community support, as illustrated by these comments: "I learned a lot about students who grew up on farms, and how their lifestyle was different;" and "I saw exactly where students lived or we walked by students' houses on an outing. The kids loved this!"

Furthermore, regarding "knowing students" and "low enrollments" several interns connected the two aspects, as illustrated by these statements: "I found the smaller class sizes made it easier to help students when they needed it; and they had an easier time could opening up to the teachers;" and "The small classes made it possible to have easier interaction with the students and helped build close relationships among the staff."

Twice the rate of post-interns from the recent cohort than from the earlier one highlighted the opportunity of being involved in a variety of diverse activities, as shown by the following responses: "I had lots of chances to get involved in extra-curricular activities;" "I got to meet all the parents; I got to build close relationships with all the students and staff; and I was able to teach some in K, Grades 1, 2, 5, 6, and in a variety of subjects in high school;" and "I had tons of opportunities to be involved and I felt a strong sense of belonging." Regarding item #8, one respondent wrote: "I had fewer distractions (friends, going out, etc.)"; for item 39 another respondent stated: "The cost of living was cheap."

The two cohorts generated similar listings of negative aspects (e.g., the expense incurred, the lack of professional resources, and the separation from family/friends).

Disadvantages of teaching in rural schools. The values shown in Table 2 summarize the views of cohorts of post-interns regarding the negative aspects of rural internships.

Summary of Post-Interns' Responses Identifying Disadvantages of Interning in Rural Schools.

Disadvantages	2011-2012 (n=16)	Cumulative (n=101)
1. Expenses for travel, accommodation, etc.	69	40
2. Lack of professional resources/services	63	65
3. Isolation from support groups (family, friends)	31	29
4. Invasion of privacy	19	47
5. Work overload (split grades, extra-curricular duties)	13	12
6. Inadequate living accommodation	13	14
7. Feeling "distanced" from staff/peers	13	9

Note. Values are rounded and represent percentage of respondents who identified disadvantages in their written comments. The cumulative sum includes five previous cohorts mentored/supervised by one of the authors during the 1998-20032 period, as documented in Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003).

As was the case for the data shown in Table 1, both sub-groups identified similar aspects; and for nearly two-thirds of the items, both cohorts registered similar percentages. We provide illustrative comments from the recent cohort for these aspects, many of which had also been identified by the earlier cohorts.

- Lack of professional resources/services: "There was a limited amount of resources and technological access compared to the city, e.g., bookstores, supplies, and IT."

- Isolation from support groups: "I was really far away from my friends, family, part-time job, and lifestyle that I was used to; it was extremely boring outside of teaching;" and "It was too quiet with not many places to go during week-ends."

- Work overload: "Long days. Left home at 7 and would get back anywhere from 5 to 7 pm;" and "I found that teaching was already a long day, plus the long drive. I first had to drive across the city to my carpool and then travel out of town, and then repeat it all at the end of the day."

- Inadequate living accommodation: "I do wish I had more assistance finding living accommodations;" and "Living in a stranger's basement may be a negative."

- Feeling distanced from staff/peers: "Limited contact with other interns" (indicated by an intern who had been placed in a community with no other interns at the school); and "Sometimes the closeness can be a cause for 'drama'."

Regarding the other disadvantages shown in Table 2, a wider margin between the values of both cohorts was evident. For instance, nearly 70% of the recent group wrote comments like: "The travelling and gas expenses were negative because I lived an hour and 15 minutes from my school;" "I found commuting everyday costly and time-consuming;" and "The long drive and the excess finances were a drawback, because we already had to pay tuition to do the internship, and some of us either had to drive a long way or we had to re-locate and pay more rent — all with no reimbursements."

By contrast, despite the fact that the percentage for the recent cohort, who identified "invasion of privacy" as negative, was considerably lower than that for the cumulative average, typical comments from the recent group were: "Don't let your personal life get in the way of your school work" and "You have to be more cautious about what you say and to whom you say it. The spotlight is always on you." With respect to "lack of diversity," a few post-interns in the earlier groups had mentioned that they found some of the rural schools/families/communities to be somewhat closed or narrow-minded in their worldviews.

Advice for future interns. In Table 3, the advice offered by post-interns to future interns is summarized. For "becoming involved," sample comments from the recent group were: "You will enjoy getting to know the students, parents, and community in a closer way than you would in a city;" "Embrace the uniqueness of this opportunity;" and "If you want a support network from all the staff and community helping you every step of the way, rural schools are the way to go." Interestingly, the "seeking car pool arrangements" results may indicate that more teachers are choosing to live in larger centers and to drive to their rural workplace than was the case a decade earlier (O'Connor, 2011).

Summary of Post-Interns' Advice for
Future Neophytes Placed in Rural Schools.

	Advice	2011-2012 (n=16)	Cumulative (n=101)
1.	Become involved in variety of school/community activities	100	46
2.	Be conscientious about teaching activities	25	31
3.	Communicate with other colleagues	25	15
4.	Seek car-pooling arrangements	19	0
5.	Be open-minded about the rural placement	13	19
6.	Become familiar with community beforehand	6	1

Note. Values are rounded and represent percentage of respondents who offered advice in their written comments. The cumulative sum includes five previous cohorts mentored/supervised by one of the authors during the 1998-2002 period, as documented in Ralph (2000, 2002, 2003).

Below, sample comments are presented, illustrating the four other categories of post-intern advice shown in Table 3.

- Be conscientious: "Get involved in sports, arts, and other activities to become part of the community;" "Make connections with the community;" "Be aggressive in participating in the community and extra-curricular;" and "Get your sleep."

- Communicate with colleagues:"Reach out to other interns, the staff, and your facilitator if you need advice on adapting."

- Be open-minded: "If you attended urban schools, take interning in a rural setting as a positive growth experience;" "Give it a chance and wait until you start the experience. It is often different than you originally think;" and "I was not going to even do my internship because I was placed so far from home, but I am glad I did. It's not as bad as you may picture it to be."

- Become familiar: "Get to know the area before you begin. There could be some great resources within your community, but once you begin interning it is hard to take the time to meet people outside the school."

These data in the three above tables substantiate previous research findings documented from three sources: (a) previous studies conducted regarding this same College's internship program (Ralph 2000, 2002, 2003); (b) studies conducted with teacher-education internships in other jurisdictions (Davidson, 2011; Dunaway, Bird, Flowers, & Lyons, 2010); and (c) research from other professional practicum/clinical programs outside of teacher education, such as engineering (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2009b); and nursing (Ralph, Walker, & Wimmer, 2009a). Many of the findings across all four sectors were similar.

Implications for Stakeholders

This study has confirmed that, in general, rural placements for the extended-practicum are viewed positively by post-interns who experienced them. Several implications for the college of education and the school districts involved in the study may be drawn from the findings.

First, the educational leaders involved need to continue to collaborate to maintain the positive aspects of the rural internship as identified in Table 1. Because teachers will thus need to be recruited for these rural areas, it is logical to assume that the university and the rural school divisions must sustain the positive features of the internship in order to attract prospective teachers to rural districts. In fact, recent efforts have been initiated by both parties involved in these studies, such as: the university initiating closer college-school integration of pedagogical preparation in pre-internship student teaching sessions (Lemisko & Ward, 2010), and rural school divisions conducting preliminary job interviews with all interns placed in their schools, for possible future teaching positions (E. Brockman, personal communication, December 20, 2011). Furthermore, the university and the school divisions may need to provide additional support in areas they may not have typically viewed as under their jurisdiction, such as considering subsidizing the rural internship by providing all interns with a monthly stipend to help defray additional expenses.

A second related implication for school division and university leaders is that they would need to continue to cooperate at eliminating the perceived drawbacks indicated in Table 2. For example, in order to continue to help remedy the lack of availability of instructional resources, both parties could continue to develop electronic communication connections between/among the schools and the university to distribute curricular and instructional resources, or subsidize a temporary courier or pick-up-and-delivery service to operate between/among the school divisions, the university, and various libraries (Ralph, 2003).

Furthermore, to address the problem raised by some respondents related to the securing of adequate living accommodation in certain rural communities, renewed efforts by each school to alert the whole community of this need each year could help alleviate this problem. Also, to deal with the concern of feeling isolated from the staff, all school

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personnel could be encouraged to welcome interns by offering personal and professional support and encouragement, particularly during the initial weeks of the extended practicum. Such strategies have been identified in previous research, as having been shown to be mutually beneficial to all stakeholders in a practicum program (Borys et al. 1991; Ralph 2000).

An additional caveat attached to the findings of this study is one that the authors believe needs further research. This caveat relates to the several variations between the percentages of each cohort who identified the respective aspects. Although the two cohorts identified similar lists of advantages, disadvantages, and advice, several aspects differed in the proportions of respondents from each cohort by which they were identified. Those variations may have been due to a variety of factors that would warrant deeper investigation, such as: recent demographic changes in the province where the studies were conducted, an apparent desire among rural teachers to reside in metropolitan areas and thus to commute to the rural schools, broader social/economic/cultural trends, or changes in a new generation of neophyte professionals entering the workforce.

A final limitation of this study, common to all qualitative research, is the lack of generalizability to other situations (Hittleman & Simon, 2006). One could simply not generalize to other jurisdictions with any degree of technical certainty, because the sample size of the recent cohort was substantially smaller than that of the earlier cohort. However, a more tenable approach, as recognized by many research experts in the social sciences, would be to assert that this generalization difficulty could be re-framed in terms of *transferability* (Donmoyer, 1990). Transferability means that leaders in similar settings would examine the findings presented in this present study in order to gain possible insights to help them inform or interpret the functioning of their own programs (Best & Kahn, 2006).

In conclusion, it is the authors' hope that all post-interns, at the conclusion of their respective rural extended-practicum programs, could endorse what one respondent from the recent cohort stated:

> *Coming from a big city my entire life, I found it kind of scary and unsettling when I read [X school in rural location] on my internship placement. I found I had to be open-minded about the placement. I would **never** have experienced the closeness and support of the community or culture in this way at any city school. It is amazing.*

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