

Teacher Recruitment in Rural and Aboriginal Communities

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Introduction

The north coast of Labrador is full of rough terrain and rugged coastlines. There are six active communities in the northern most area of this region: Nain, Natuashish, Hopedale, Makkovik, Postville and Rigolet, which have a population of about 300-1200 each, consisting of a majority of Inuit descent, while the one, Natuashish, is mainly Innu/First Nations. People in these communities spend most of their time on the land and water, taking part in culturally rich activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering wood. The conditions can be harsh in the north with temperatures ranging from about 25 degrees Celsius in summer to about -50 degrees in winter. There is a great respect for understanding and navigating the land and water, especially for knowledge of survival and awareness of incoming weather which can include days of low visibility with blowing snow and winds from 80 to 100 km/h in some of the most desolate places in our province. All the six communities are rural communities. Budge (2006) argues that it is very difficult to establish a set of common characteristics among rural communities, however, many rural communities have similar traits and challenges such as decline in population, remoteness, out migration, and conflict over purposes of schooling. She illustrates that many people from rural communities have prominent attachment to their place. She goes further and explains that understanding of place is possible through the observation of our relationship to each other and to the world. She presents six characteristics to understand the sense of place: connectedness, development of identity and culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and activism and civic engagement.

The researchers, educators, and policy makers who work in the field of rural education tend to agree that rural communities face many challenges, and recruitment and retention of highly qualified teachers is one of them (Azano, & Stewart, 2016; Corbett, 2009; Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006; Mulcahy, 1999). Some researchers also argue that paucity of quality research exist on issues on rural schooling. For instance, in their review of the literature over a twelve year period, Arnold, Newman, Gaddy and Dean (2005) found that only 21% studies were broadly conducted to investigate educational problems in rural settings. The findings also showed the lack of experimental research and the lack of high quality research such that out of the 106 studies, 48 studies were of low quality research.

We felt the need to write this paper due to the importance and priority of Aboriginal education, provincially and nationally (Anderson, Horton, & Orwick, 2004). We also agree with Markey, Breen, Lauzon, Gibson, Ryser, and Mealy (2015) when they stated "all Canadians must participate in the window of opportunity that follows the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to acknowledge and seek serious corrective steps to heal the "historical trauma" suffered by Aboriginal peoples in this country" (p. iii). Aboriginal people include First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. The authors of this paper have special interest in rural education. The first author (Shirley Nicole McLean) has been working in rural and Aboriginal schools for over eight years, while the second author (Nadeem Saqlain) has been conducting research on rural education. This paper is based on practice in the field and a review of the

literature. In this paper, we will highlight the teacher recruitment and retention issue with the focus of Aboriginal education specifically in the north coast of Labrador. It is hoped that through this paper, the readers will have a glimpse of the conditions in rural and Aboriginal communities, barriers to recruitment of teachers for rural and aboriginal communities, and recruitment strategies.

Conditions in Rural and Aboriginal communities

The physical environment can seem harsh in these rural, aboriginal communities, but the social conditions can also be culturally shocking. In 2015, the Federal Election priorities for First Nations in Canada highlighted many of the issues relating to Aboriginal groups. According to the document "Closing the Gap," half of First Nations children live in poverty, 48% of children in foster care are Aboriginal (while only making up 4.3% of the population), with over 40,000 children in foster care (more than three times the number that were in residential schools at the peak), tuberculosis rates are 31 times higher than the national average, suicide rates are 5-7 times higher than the national average, 132 First Nations communities are under boil water advisory and 1 in 4 adults are living in overcrowded and deteriorated housing units (Assembly of First Nations, 2015, p.8). Although this document refers to First Nations, in our experience, these trends are on par with the Inuit communities. These conditions would appear dismal to any professional in their teaching career, but most especially to those being recruited in their pre-service years. Add to these social issues, the statistics for Aboriginal education are just as startling. Wotherspoon (2006) highlighted many issues related to Aboriginal communities, including less high school completion rates, high dropout rates, poverty, family breakdown, domestic violence, inadequate housing, and frequent relocation from one school to another. Some days, simply showing up to class is success.

In the northern communities of Newfoundland and Labrador, a number of interventions have been implemented to eliminate some of these barriers. Community liaison workers have been established in some northern schools to track attendance, make home visits and encourage attendance and punctuality in our schools. Also, funding has been established through the self-government for the Inuit, called the Nunatsiavut Government, for 21st century learning in the public system and to pursue post-secondary studies. In Hopedale, levels I and II of the adult basic education program are introduced to high needs students in grade 10-12, where they graduate with their peers and move onto the local college to finish the level III. In addition to suitable curriculum, "Aboriginal students are highly sensitive to the fact that teachers' actions and orientations can sometimes make a substantial difference to the specific education and life pathways they follow," (Wotherspoon, 2006, p. 676) making it even more important to recruit and retain committed and qualified teachers who can overcome the cultural and social isolation they may feel upon arriving in such communities.

Increased sensitivity to the issues and culture of Aboriginal students have led to changes in education in these schools. Wotherspoon (2006) provides the details of some of the initiatives such as the establishment of Inuit studies courses (including language based education, life skills programs, and high school credit courses such as the upcoming Inuit Studies course currently being developed by north coast teachers in Labrador), inclusion of crafts, visits by elders and community members, spirituality, knowledge of nature, and tours to local heritage sites are encouraging a connection between the Aboriginal student and the current education system. Additionally, schools are offering programs such as breakfast programs, community kitchens, child care and family support (through the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development), justice mediation, substance abuse therapy (Hopedale currently has an Alcoholics Anonymous group), Fetal Alcohol Syndrome information sessions, and more.

Barriers

There are a number of universal barriers to recruiting teachers to rural areas. Almost ten years ago, when Shirley first applied to a job in Labrador, she was offered a position in Hopedale. At the time, it seemed difficult to recruit teachers to the north coast, as there were multiple districts in the province and jobs were not easily transferable. She had been on the north coast once in high school and was not interested in moving to this area. Reflecting back on this time, it could have been the culture shock during her first trip to the north coast as a student, or the ignorance about the Inuit culture as stereotypes and media were responsible for her impressions of these people. Barriers to recruiting and retaining people to these northern schools include similar issues in British Columbia, that is, teachers do not want to move to and/or decide to leave communities due to “geographic isolation, weather, distance from larger communities and family and inadequate shopping” (Collins, 1999, p. 1). Collins (1999) stated that recruiting teachers to these areas needs more emphasis on the benefits of teaching in rural areas, and the benefits of small schools.

There are many supported ways to recruit teachers to rural areas, including Aboriginal communities. These include financial benefits such as monetary gains, land/home ownership offers, and loan forgiveness in turn for time spent in rural areas. Other methods of recruiting include establishing a “homegrown” program that grooms young people to pursue teaching careers (currently being offered in Goose Bay with a focus on Inuit Education), developing effective marketing tools and reducing social and geographic isolation (Anderson et al., 2004; Monk, 2007). Other programs include pre-service teacher fieldwork, mentorship programs, and establishing social and community supports (Lock, 2008).

Financial Benefits

Financial incentives include salary levels, providing land for homes or tuition support in exchange for time commitment (Osterholm, Horn & Johnson, 2006, p. 3). In Newfoundland and Labrador, teachers in our Aboriginal communities are paid on the same scale as teachers throughout the rest of the province. However there is a \$5000 dollar bonus, divided into two payments, one mid-year and one in June, called a “recruitment and retention bonus.” There is also northern allowance spread throughout the pay periods and a travel bonus distributed in April. At first this seems enticing, and is appreciated, but the difference in the cost of living from the rest of the province hardly makes it a lure to new teachers, especially to those who are in debt from student loans. A loan forgiveness program for a contractual commitment to stay in a rural community could be more feasible and enticing to our current pre-service teachers. To date, we are unaware of any tuition support or loan forgiveness programs offered to northern teachers but this strategy may be helpful to recruit and retain teachers, given that any online/distance program for a masters can take up to three years typically, this would likely be enough to establish connections in a northern community.

Unfortunately, the housing situation is bleak in northern Labrador. These communities do not have the land or resources to overcome their own housing crisis. Teachers are currently in school board owned complexes, with some spread through the local housing association’s mini homes. Land and financial support is so scarce, that only two to three houses a year are built. Offering teachers land in an Aboriginal community would bring an abundance of legal questions as well as upset to local residents who are in overcrowded homes.

Effective Marketing

According to Maranto and Shuls (2012), "monetary incentives have not proved their ability to attract teachers" (p.1). Instead they encourage non-monetary incentives that encourage teachers to apply to rural areas including: freedom in the classroom, advancement, professional growth, collegial environment, results-driven organization and engaging in public service. The rural school should be marketed online with benefits listed such as smaller class sizes and fewer discipline issues, with a focus on the safe and caring school climate of rural schools. Personal connections are a definite strength in our northern schools, despite the size of staffs ranging from six teachers in Rigolet to more than twenty in Nain. Personal connections extend beyond professional staff development and into the student-teacher relationship. "If a child is into the wrong scene- drugs, gangs, etc. - the program will not save them unless there is an able, caring individual who knows the student well and is emotionally invested," says Osterholm, Horn and Johnson (2006, p. 5). Students are also provided with more opportunities for sports and the arts (within financial constraints) as there are not as many students competing for placements on these teams. With less time spent on commuting/away from families, teachers in small schools are able to offer more extra-curricular time and curriculum support outside of the regular school days. When marketing to the potential new teacher, this may appeal to their teaching desires as well as personal hobbies and interests creating an inviting environment for the whole teacher and therefore having a positive impact on the students.

Rural school teachers feel genuine concern for one another (Simmons, 2005). Some rural schools reported staff members considered themselves to be a family that had a personal as well as professional regard for the individual members. "When teachers in rural schools experienced problems in their lives, they were given widespread support. Similarly, one person's success became reason for celebration by many," stated Simmons (2005, p. 50). Based on this report, emotional tightness within the school and even within the larger community was generally viewed to be more important than easy access to shops and museums.

This recruitment strategy is around marketing the rural experience, emphasizing the sense of community, and the peace and quiet of a rural community with lower crime rates, less stress, increased personal connections both in the school and in the community (Osterholm, Horn & Johnson, 2006). Again, this is not all true to Aboriginal communities, as there is a significant crime rate, however, it is generally quiet and the community values the personal connections a teacher makes within the community. The local population appreciates when an "outsider" makes an effort to attend local events, learn local crafts and engage with the community. These opportunities should be marketed to potential employees. Osterholm, Horn and Johnson's (2006) statement that "The school serves as the community's social heart," (p.4) is a valid way to appeal to the teacher's intrinsic values, and to those who are interested in more than a teaching position but also a lifestyle in a rural community.

Teacher Preparedness

Anderson et al. (2004) stated that non-aboriginal teachers play a critical role to teach Aboriginal students. Therefore, teacher training schools should prepare pre-service teachers with the knowledge of Aboriginal people and their culture. Some other researchers also argue in favor of culturally responsive teacher preparation programs (Kitchen & Hodson, 2013). While others demand the need for a place-consciousness teacher preparation program for rural and Aboriginal communities (White, 2008). Several other strategies may be used to prepare teachers for rural and Aboriginal communities. Interviews for teachers interested in rural placements often include discussion on how to prepare for a move to the

coastal community, what to expect in terms of food, fuel, housing and class diversity. Recruiting teachers to rural, Aboriginal schools needs to include teacher preparation to alleviate the stress of the change in culture and expectations in these communities. Students, teachers and parents can be part of this process, proving there is unity in the community, as well as introduce faces to the individual applying to the position (Osterholm, Horn & Johnson, 2006).

In Australia, pre-service teachers apply to take part in a field trip to a rural area to increase their understanding of the rural, Aboriginal educational experience (Jay, Moss & Cherednichenko, 2008). They participate in a pre-experience forum, then attend participating both as observers and participants. They are part of the planning as well as engaged throughout the trip. Teachers are expected to keep reflective journals, based on action-research models, and are provided opportunities to inquire and discuss the new experiences and knowledge through reflective discussions. Throughout the experience, the physical and spiritual culture is emphasized as well as humour, collaboration and team-problem solving skills. This experience is noted to have a positive impact on the preservice teacher, both professionally and personally. This authentic engagement enhanced their professional skills as well as allowed them to articulate their own knowledge and skills. The benefits of this program includes developing cross-cultural connections, literacy-based activities, an awareness of Aboriginal knowledge as a starting point for learning as well as an understanding of the Aboriginal learner.

Being prepared is one of the most important factors in recruiting quality teachers who can then be open to retaining their positions. Although Shirley, one of the authors of this paper, was not assigned a mentor, she did consult with teachers who had lived both in Makkovik and Hopedale upon accepting the position and then the discussions were ongoing prior to moving to the coast. Unexpected stressors for new teachers moving to rural areas include multi-grade or multi-age classrooms, feelings of isolation, and being in a new culture. According to Adams and Woods (2015), unexpected changes, such as changing plans in and out of school due to weather, deaths, or classroom composition are just some of the things one can hardly understand until it is experienced. Also, information about school routines, food, fuel and climate and classroom management are just a few of the items included in the school's "Teacher Handbook" in Hopedale. However, it is unfortunate that this is not yet online and new teachers are often left to find this binder of information too late. Also, it needs to be updated at least annually to be effective. Preparing teachers on a professional level by providing them with information on teaching approaches in Aboriginal communities as well as on a personal level with information on cultural activities and hobbies in the community can arouse excitement in an individual rather than stroke the sense of the fear of the unknown.

Exit Interviews

Another recruitment strategy includes conducting exit interviews when teachers do resign to understand further why they are leaving, including for reasons other than dissatisfaction with their teaching position (Ulferts, 2016). According to Mueller and Carr-Stewart (2011), there is a great disruption in student achievement as well as staff communication when staff experience turnovers.

Dynamics of functional workplace teams are disrupted when teachers leave, leading to increased opportunity for miscommunication and strained working relationships among remaining staff. Additionally, when teachers leave a school, they take all the implicit cultural and organizational knowledge they have gained with them and destroy any pedagogic partnerships previously established with other teachers (p.62).

In Hopedale, in the past two years, it was noted that about five teachers on a staff of about 25 left for reasons such as moving closer to family, wanting to purchase their own home, hoping to meet a life partner, moving closer to a larger medical center and moving closer to home. Neither teacher quoted the school as a major reason to leave the community to pursue other positions in education.

Personal Experience

Although Shirley grew up in a company-owned community in a private school, her first job offer came from the Labrador School Board in 2008. She accepted a position in a K-12 school teaching physical education to approximately 120 students in a northern community of about 95% Inuit descent. She would realize that this Aboriginal community, Hopedale, would come with its distinct issues and a lure to the Labrador wild that she had never known in her childhood home. Although rural, Aboriginal schools have a multitude of social issues, there are a number of benefits to obtaining a position in a small school in rural Labrador, just as there is in rural Newfoundland. Based on Shirley's experience, she came to Hopedale with only the intention of using it as a stepping stone to another position but because of the professional and community support, her previous experience in a rural community, and the flexibility of a small school in program delivery, she continues the position now into her ninth year with no intention of leaving either the school or community.

Conclusion

Rural and remote communities face many challenges. Teacher recruitment and retention has been a perennial challenge in those communities. Our main intent was to focus on rural and Aboriginal communities in Labrador. We presented a brief introduction of those communities including the present conditions. Most, if not all, scholars in the field lament the lack of quality research in this field. We also found limited online published literature on Aboriginal education. We feel the need of effective research with divergent methodologies and approaches to generate the knowledge in this field. In terms of teacher recruitment, of course there are several obstacles. But these obstacles can be removed by implementing proper strategies. The list of strategies that we have presented in this paper is not inclusive. These are some strategies which can be used to recruit teachers for rural and Aboriginal education.

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