

Exploring Place and Practicing Justice: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Success in Rural Schools

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This article examines efforts made by a teacher preparation program to provide pre-service teachers with an introduction to the rural context, strategies for place-based pedagogy, and a field experience in rural schools. The study explores the influence of these efforts, along with how students' sense of place and educational upbringing, might be related to pre-service teachers' perceptions of preparedness for teaching in a rural school. The struggle to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers in rural schools is ubiquitous in the literature on rural education, but there is limited research on preparing pre-service teachers for rural schools. We draw on critical and sociocultural theories to understand the experiences of four teacher candidates as they negotiate their personal histories, expectations, and experiences in rural teaching contexts. While exposure to rural life has been credited with increasing the likelihood for teaching in rural schools, we suggest that exposure is only one aspect of preparing successful rural teachers.

Rural education advocates have argued for decades that rural students represent a forgotten minority (Pankratz, 1975), and that preparing teachers to meet the needs of rural learners marginalized by poverty and geographic isolation takes differentiated, specialized training (Robinson, 1954). The 1944 White House Charter of Education for Rural Children (Dawson & Hubbard, 1944) represents a government tome of rural statistics, recommendations, and program ideas, in which Eleanor Roosevelt points out the obvious disparities between rural and “modern” schools. The charter proclaims that every rural child deserves teachers “who are educated to deal effectively with the problems peculiar to rural schools” (p. 30).

Some seventy years later, however, these timeworn frustrations and examples of continued inequities and injustices illustrated by contemporary rural education researchers persist (e.g., Azano, 2011; Abel & Sewell, 1999; Budge, 2006; Burton & Johnson, 2010; Mathis, 2003), such as the continued lag of college completion between rural and nonrural students (Gibbs, 1998; Provasnik et al., 2007) or the ways in which educational policy discriminates against

rural students (Jimerson, 2005). Recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers also remains a challenge for rural schools, due in part to the lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, lower salaries, and higher poverty rates (Miller, 2012). Finding strategies to mitigate these challenges, such as student loan forgiveness and housing (Lowe, 2006), has proven to be complicated, especially when rural communities typically lack amenities that are more readily available in less remote or more affluent places (e.g., community services or recreation facilities). While community closeness, small rural class sizes, and other attributes of rural communities are often noted as advantages for working in a rural school, realities of rural life can serve as barriers for recruiting highly qualified teachers (Barley & Brigham, 2008; Monk, 2007).

Regardless, these efforts to recruit teachers rarely address *preparing* novice teachers for success in rural classrooms. Efforts to recruit teachers to work in rural schools are futile if those teachers are not adequately prepared to provide instruction that meets the needs of the students. Staffing classrooms with ill-prepared teachers is detrimental to students *and* novice teachers. Moreover, these teachers will have to be replaced, exacerbating the problem of staffing schools by creating a revolving door at the head of the classroom. Barley and Brigham (2008) cite five key strategies for preparing teachers for success in rural schools, but only one of these strategies, multiple-subject certification, directly relates to efforts that can be addressed by a teacher preparation program. The remaining strategies, such as access to teacher preparation programs, are aimed

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at existing rural community members who would become teachers in their home communities—what others (Collins, 1999; Lowe, 2006; Monk, 2007) refer to as the “grow your own strategy.” Other strategies, such as coursework focused on rural issues, are aimed at supporting in-service teachers to minimize turnover.

In theory, multiple-subject certification, especially in shortage areas of social studies, math, science, and special education (Barley & Brigham, 2008), is a reasonable solution. However, obtaining these certifications can, quite often, be too great a time or financial burden for college students who are pursuing initial licensure. In any case, teacher education programs should offer additional strategies that can help reverse the trend of more than a half-century of making little appreciable progress towards equity in the quality of rural schools.

White and Reid (2008) argue that integrating place-consciousness into teacher education programs is an important part of preparing pre-service teachers for work in rural schools. Place-based pedagogy is a method and practice of grounding learning in a student’s sense of place or the lived experiences shaped by people, cultures, and histories. Therefore, place-based or place-conscious efforts (see Azano, 2011; Brooke, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003, Theobald, 1997) in a teacher education program would call for both an examination of place (on the part of the teacher candidate) as well as an overview of place-relevant pedagogies. White and Reid (2008) suggest that as “teachers come to know, and know about, a particular rural place, and come to understand its relationships to, and with other places, they [teachers] are developing knowledge, sensitivities, awareness, skills, attitudes, and abilities” (p. 6) for greater success in a rural setting.

To that end, we examined efforts made in our teacher preparation program to expose pre-service teachers to rural education, place-based pedagogy, and field experience in rural schools. Exposing pre-service teachers to the realities of rural life (both good and bad) can be an effective, even necessary (Butler, 2013), strategy. In their discussion of preparing English teachers for rural schools, Eckert and Petrone (2013) advocate for meaningful experiences and argue that without this exposure pre-service teachers may default to “dominant narratives of rural deficits” which influence “teaching identities, choices of employment opportunities to pursue, and their attitudes toward students and community members in rural communities” (p. 72). Supporting this claim, Miller (2012) reports that rural schools are better able to recruit teachers with previous exposure to or immersion in rural communities. For teacher education programs, it is important to ensure that this exposure or immersion is intentional, well-planned, and implemented with a critical lens so that pre-service teachers, particularly those who themselves grew up in rural schools, do not

simply rely on the *apprenticeship of observation* (Eckert & Petrone, 2013). The apprenticeship of observation serves as a fallacy, presuming that having grown up in a rural community inherently prepares a future teacher for success in a rural school. Those experiences, however, can serve as blinders. As Britzman (2003) explains, pre-service teachers “bring to teacher education their education biography and some well-worn and commonsensical images of the teacher’s work” (p. 27). We believe those “commonsensical images” need to be challenged with thoughtful exposure by teacher candidates in rural teaching placements.

Some researchers suggest that teacher candidates from rural backgrounds are more likely to be successful in rural schools. In particular, Collins (1999) argues that school districts “must target candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or educational experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas” (p. 2). Other scholars, however, question this claim and argue that “personal characteristics suited to rural teaching would be difficult to determine” (Hudson & Hudson, 2008, p. 69), and that long-term practice of only recruiting from a rural pool would limit teacher selection and diversity of expertise. As Hudson and Hudson (2008) reason, “broadening educational experiences” might increase opportunities for preparing rural teachers. By design, our teacher education program requires pre-service teachers to complete a rural field experience—either as a practicum or for their student teaching placement.

This study sought to understand the impact of that exposure. We contend that a crucial key piece of preparing pre-service teachers for success in rural schools is helping them develop an awareness of how their cultural contexts shape their identities and teaching practices. Influenced by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) claim that understanding and response are prerequisite components of meaning making, we believe it is vital that pre-service teachers are prepared to attend to the nuances of their own cultural contexts and consider how they might be brought into dialogue with the cultural contexts of the students with whom they will be working. This focus creates opportunities for our teacher candidates (from urban, rural, and suburban areas) to intentionally examine their personal histories. Our teacher candidates are, in many cases, excellent candidates for recruiting efforts enacted by rural districts to bring talented teachers to their remote communities.

While having a rural relationship or connection to a rural community is an important component in recruiting initiatives (Burton & Johnson, 2010), we fear that relying solely on those connections might undermine the importance of teaching theory and pedagogy to pre-service teachers who may themselves think it is unneeded. Moreover, because of pervasive misconceptions about rural communities, in addition to meaningful exposure, “discussions and

experiences related to the unique nature of rural education need to be a part of teacher education programs” (Burton & Johnson, 2010, p. 384). Staffing rural schools with high-quality teachers and retaining those teachers is an issue of justice and equity, and we advocate for the creation of a school model in which the experiences of all cultural, racial, geographic, and socioeconomic contexts are valued and integrated into the curriculum.

In this study, we examined the ways in which one’s sense of place and educational upbringing might be related to a teacher candidate’s perceptions of preparedness for teaching in a rural school. Responding to specific calls for focused preparation of rural teachers (Eckert & Petrone, 2013; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1998) and for research on examining that preparation (Hudson & Hudson, 2008; White & Reid, 2008), as well as the motivations for teaching in rural schools and the “synergy between identity and relationship in rural teachers’ decisions to remain in rural communities” (Burton & Johnson, 2010, p. 384), we asked how teacher candidates reflect on personal histories to construct their experiences of teaching in a rural student teaching placement. Additionally, we sought to understand teacher candidates’ perceptions of rural students and communities. Drawing on the voices and experiences of recent graduates of our teacher education program, we discuss strategies for preparing pre-service teachers for success in rural schools.

Theoretical Framework

Both authors have experienced living and working in rural communities and, prior to becoming teacher educators, taught high school English in communities vastly different from the ones in which they grew up—one from the rural South who left to teach in urban schools and the other from a major metropolitan area who taught in rural Appalachia. As newcomers (or outsiders) to these diverse environments, we learned the value of seeing the world from another person’s perspective, beliefs rooted in our understanding of Freire’s (2005) argument that it “is in experiencing the differences that we discover ourselves” (p. 127). As we endeavor to understand ourselves and others, Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of language helps us make sense of the complexities that are present every day in our classrooms. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia attends to the ways in which the utterances we construct as we engage in dialogue with one another are colored and shaped by the socially specific environment in which they are crafted *and* the larger “socio-ideological consciousness” (p. 276). In short, words do not exist in a vacuum. Language functions in “a tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276) that influences understanding. Words live on the boundaries between the contexts the

speaker has placed them in and the alien contexts the addressee brings to the dialogue, and the speaker cannot “excise the rejoinder from this combined context” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 284). The complexities of language make social interaction multifaceted, which, in turn, makes classrooms places where the myriad cultural contexts of students, teachers, and pre-service teachers come into contact with one another. Valuing and navigating divergent cultural contexts are, in our experience, fundamental elements of success in any classroom.

We also draw from a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003), which examines “the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education” (p. 10), and as such consider the nuanced qualities (i.e., social, ecological, political) of rural life. In this research, we seek to understand how pre-service teachers’ conceptualize their own sense of place and how their place identities intersect with their experiences of student teaching in rural settings. In doing so, we use the lens of a critical pedagogy of place to challenge these personal histories or texts in an effort “to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 11). By understanding how teacher candidates’ form expectations of rural students, we hope to better understand how we might not only expose or immerse pre-service teachers in rural schools but also provide them with a frame for discovering themselves within that experience. We believe engaging pre-service teachers in these processes will better prepare them for teaching positions in rural schools while also enacting a place-based pedagogy in their teaching.

Methods

This project represents our first step at examining how we can improve our teacher education program in terms of preparing our pre-service teachers to succeed in the rural school environment. We began by recruiting a purposeful sample (Maxwell, 2005) of rural student teachers from a university situated with access to multiple rural school districts in the Appalachian region.

Participants

To determine eligibility for the sample, we looked up school locale codes using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) for the cohort of student teachers ($n = 95$). The NCES uses three subcategories to describe rural school locales—rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote—as they relate to population density and distance from urbanized areas or urban clusters (with rural fringe being more populated and closer to an urbanized area, and rural remote being the least populated and farthest from an urbanized area or urban cluster). Based on secondary-level

student teachers' schools, 15 student teachers were eligible, representing five disciplines in education: agriculture (n = 4), music (n = 2), science (n = 4), math (n = 3), and social studies (n = 2). Many of the other, ineligible students in the cohort had completed a rural practicum and were therefore not in a rural student teaching placement. Also, several student teachers (n = 6) were in rural elementary schools, but as secondary teacher educators we focused our efforts on pre-service secondary teachers.

All 15 students were invited to participate in the study with follow-up e-mails sent to the group. From these recruitment efforts, four students consented and participated in the study. These four students represent four of the five disciplines; we were unable to recruit a music educator. All four participants had completed a Content Area Reading course with Amy prior to their student teaching, which included a focus on rural education and place-based pedagogy. The four student teachers in this study were teaching in schools designated as rural fringe and rural distant. (We did not have any student teachers in schools designated as rural remote.)

Beth¹ was a mathematics education student placed in a rural distant high school with an average class size of 12. Beth shared that she would have felt more confident teaching in a suburban school like the one she had attended, with approximately 400 students in her graduating class. Even though Beth graduated in the top 5% of her high school class, she brings to her teaching career the sensibility of a student who struggled with reading and writing early in school.

Brad was a history and social studies education student who was placed in a middle school with 350 students, designated as rural fringe. Brad grew up in a middle-class suburban school with more than 1,000 students.

Daniella, a science education student, completed her student teaching in a rural distant high school. She grew up in a rural community and felt confident about teaching rural students, stating that she shared similar interests, such as riding four wheelers. Daniella expressed a certain level of insider knowledge about her students.

Sammi grew up on a farm in a rural county and was studying to become an agriculture educator. Her student teaching placement was in a rural distant high school with approximately 300 students. Because of her upbringing, Sammi felt prepared to teach in a rural school and said she could relate to students because of this commonality.

While this sample is relatively small, each participant represents a distinct discipline: math, social studies, agriculture, and science (as indicated in Table 1). Additionally, we couch this work as an exploratory first step in our process to learn about our efforts to prepare our teacher candidates for success. Mindful of this limited

sample, it is important to note that we are not generalizing results. We do, however, offer readers the opportunity to make "conceptual inferences" (Riessman, 2008, p. 13) about the complex task of preparing pre-service teachers to succeed in rural schools. More importantly, perhaps, this project provides the foundation for future work aimed at improving the preparation we provide pre-service teachers and the educational opportunities for students in rural schools.

Data Sources

The primary data source was a questionnaire distributed to participants during their student teaching placement. Student teachers were invited to respond to eight open-ended questions, such as: Did you feel prepared to teach in a rural setting? Would you feel more or less prepared to teach in a suburban or urban setting? Explain if and how the rural context influenced teaching or student learning. Questions were developed to examine (1) how the rural context compared to the participant's personal schooling experience, (2) how pre-service teachers characterized rural students and their educational needs, and (3) how the rural context influenced their teaching or student learning. (See Appendix A for complete questionnaire.) Data collection also included two documents written during pre-service teachers' enrollment in the Content Area Reading course. One assignment was a reflection piece about the student's personal sense of place; the other was an essay of four to six pages entitled "Life in Words," in which students were asked to examine their sense of place and if or how that place (or home literacy) informed their worldview and/or philosophy of education. These assignments were used to better understand how a participant's personal background and conceptions of place might have influenced their feelings of preparedness for teaching in a rural school, as well as their perceptions of rural students and communities. In the findings section, we reference these sources as questionnaire, reflection, and essay.

Data Analysis

Using an inductive, recursive approach, we analyzed the participants' experiences and perspectives using thematic analysis to attend to issues related to individual's perceptions of their experiences in rural field placements; their feelings of preparedness for working in rural schools; and their personal, cultural, and literacy histories. We began our analysis by individually reading the data corpus and looking for themes across the questionnaires, reflections, and essays. We individually noted common themes, such as pre-conceived notions of place, the importance of relationships, and deficit model thinking. We met to discuss

¹All names are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	High School Experience	Content Area	Student Teaching Placement
Beth	Suburban	Math education	Rural distant school
Brad	Suburban	Social Studies education	Rural fringe school
Daniella	Rural distant	Science education	Rural distant school
Sammi	Rural distant	Agricultural education	Rural distant school

themes and collapse codes as necessary (e.g., apprenticeship of observation and personal histories). Once we had initially coded those data, elements of narrative analysis (Mishler, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1995) informed our analysis process because we were seeking a second level of analysis that would help us identify “the relationships that hold between and among” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 10) the categories we established. Our goal here was to consider the common themes or “conceptual manifestations” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13) that we were seeing in the data and engage in the process of synthesizing, instead of separating, these common elements. For example, we considered the relationship between the ways that personal histories made Sammi and Daniella (see Findings section) feel confident about teaching in a rural school.

Narrative analysis was also crucial in helping us consider how the participants had structured their responses to open-ended questions and constructed their essays. A third step in the analysis process included revisiting the data individually to consider how the participants structured their responses to communicate their intentions and solidify the identities that they were seeking to project. Specifically, we looked at the participants’ responses to consider how they might represent their intentions to “display a particular portrait of themselves constructed for a particular context” (Archakis & Tzanne, 2005, p. 271). For example, Sammi and Daniella described their backgrounds as rural while Brad and Beth had presented themselves as being from suburban areas. It was important, then, to apply this lens to their discussion of their comfort level in rural schools. This step enabled us to ensure that we were attending to the nuances of the way the participants discussed their memberships in particular communities. Finally, we met again to discuss our analyses and to synthesize findings.

Findings

In this section, we begin by discussing the common threads we noted across the participants’ perceptions of their experiences in their rural school placements. Their preparedness for future work in rural schools led us to focus on three key themes: (1) the influences of teacher candidates’

personal histories on their feelings of preparedness for teaching in rural schools, (2) teacher candidates’ beliefs about the importance of rural relationships, and (3) perceived challenges of teaching in rural schools. Following our discussion of these three thematic understandings, we describe two key findings or take-aways (see Making Meaning section).

Influences of Personal Histories on Preparedness for Teaching

As nonrural natives, Beth and Brad identified their personal backgrounds in suburban schools as influencing their confidence about teaching in rural schools. Beth, the math teacher, explained that her parents had grown up in rural schools, and that she had “heard stories” about their experiences. However, she said she would have felt more prepared to teach in a suburban school like the one she had attended. On the other hand, Brad felt more comfortable with the prospect of teaching in a rural school because he expressed concern over parental involvement in suburban schools, like the one in which he grew up. He explained that “most parents were very involved in their child’s education” (questionnaire), and that as a beginning teacher he would feel intimidated by that level of involvement. Embedded in his response is evidence of deficit thinking in his assumption that rural parents are not involved in their children’s education. Brad’s response highlights the importance of ensuring teacher candidates are engaged in dialogue about their perceptions of how and why parents from divergent cultural contexts may (or may not) be involved in the education of their children.

Sammi and Daniella are both rural natives and expressed confidence in teaching at rural schools. Daniella said that her common background was an asset in her student teaching placement. She explained, “Place has played an important role in who I am. It has greatly influenced the way I speak, think and learn” (reflection). As such, it was evident that Daniella not only felt comfortable using her personal history in the classroom but also felt a great sense of pride about where she was from. For example, she explained that others might judge her southern accent as “stupid” or a

“backwards hillbilly” but added: “I am proud to come from a small town. It made me who I am today” (reflection). She wrote:

I am the creek water trickling over wiggling toes, and the next highest limb on an apple tree begging to be climbed. I am the soft green grass under bare feet, and the largest night crawler chosen for bait. I am every piece of advice my favorite teacher gave to me. I am every experience of my childhood leading up to who I am today. (reflection)

Daniella used her sense of place not only as a means for relating to her students but sought to capitalize on her insider, local knowledge to enact place-based instruction during her classes. For example, in her chemistry class she had to meet an objective for teaching about the phases of matter and key concepts of pressure, vaporization, heat capacity, and so forth, as they relate to molten lava and volcanic activity. After direct instruction, group work, and a video on this topic, she made a place extension and asked students to apply key concepts to a local problem by asking, “How would you stop forest fires?” While there are no active volcanoes in the region or state, forest fires are a real and frequent occurrence with which students are familiar. This ability to negotiate her personal histories with professional knowhow makes her a particularly strong candidate for rural recruiting efforts.

Sammi expressed a similar feeling of preparedness and an ability to connect with her students. Sammi reflected on the comparisons between the high school she attended and the one hosting her student teaching placement. She noted that her high school was larger but had a weaker agriculture department and less community involvement to promote academic success for students. By comparison, she noted that her host high school had an active Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter, with a third of the school’s population as members. She also noted that it was the smallest school in the county, with approximately 300 students, and was located in a “very rural area, if not the most rural in the county” (questionnaire). Additionally, the school had community resource programs, such as an agreement with a regional community college that incentivized student success with tuition scholarships. For these reasons, she felt both the school and the agriculture program were preferable to her home high school, yet she observed that the community in which she was teaching seemed more adversely affected by poverty, unstable homes, and drug abuse. She noted, in comparison to both her personal experience and her practicum experience (in an urban setting), that her students had “less influence from family to do well in school, for further education or the work force.” She connected this difference in family support to student engagement, stating

that her students “used the excuse that they lived far away, or on the mountain, or that their parents were strung out, as reasons for not being engaged in school.” She added, “I am not saying that these are not legitimate, it was just a struggle.” Despite her affinity for rural places, Sammi was able to use a critical lens when reflecting on the realities of teaching in a rural school.

Teacher Candidates’ Beliefs About the Importance of Rural Relationships

Despite personal histories, all four participants noted that teaching in rural schools allowed them to cultivate close relationships with students. Daniella noted that her “dialect is very similar to [her students’] and [they] shared common interests.” She cited fishing, four-wheeling, and driving a truck as commonalities with her students and believed these similarities benefitted her “teaching because [she] was able to use several place based-examples during lectures and discussions” (questionnaire). Sammi was raised on a farm in a rural community, but she explained that the school for her student teaching was vastly different than the one from which she graduated. Sammi explained that more of her students were “from broken homes, poverty, and drug abuse” (questionnaire). Yet even though she noted differences, she explained that she still felt more prepared for teaching in a rural school than in a suburban or urban school: “I come from a rural setting and student taught in a rural setting. I feel that being able to relate to students plays a huge part in successful teaching and I could probably relate to rural students better because of this” (questionnaire). Beth, who claimed that she would have felt more confident in a suburban school, said it was “amazing how well you get to know students when you only have 12” (questionnaire). Beth reported that her students had weak math skills, but the small class sizes allowed her to provide individualized support for struggling students.

In addition to classroom relationships, participants also noted community connectedness as an important and beneficial aspect of teaching in a rural community. Not only did the participants describe rural communities as close or tightknit, but they also said this understanding allowed them to use the community features in their instruction. Sammi noted, “I was able to get to know the students and the community really well. I feel that if I had been in an urban school that would not as likely happened” (questionnaire). She attributed some of this connection to the fact that she is an agriculture educator, and community members are involved in agriculture “and understand its importance.” Moreover, she noted that in her rural community there was a “huge culture of care” and added that she was “honored to be part of it.” The participants explained that it was important to use personal or community background to

meet students' needs. Brad commented specifically about place-based pedagogy and how the rural context influenced how he wanted to relate social studies content to community and students' sense of place, saying it was important "to make the content relate to the community as a whole" (questionnaire).

By being able to name "place-based pedagogy" or support their reasons for "using place," we believe coverage of topics in rural education and place-based pedagogy during their required coursework gave these teacher candidates instructional resources and strategies to meet the needs of their rural learners.

Perceived Challenges of Teaching in Rural Schools

All the participants, regardless of how confident they felt in a rural placement, noted that they still struggled to have an appreciative effect on students who were falling behind or students "who had no plans to attend college" (Beth, questionnaire). Participants shared the perception that many of their students were unmotivated, and the participants often struggled to engage their students during daily instructional activities. For example, Beth noted that the students "seemed to have little ambition or long-term goals for themselves." This sentiment was echoed by Sammi, who explained that many students "were hardworking but there were plenty who could care less about doing anything productive" (questionnaire). The participants also noted that they believed their students had "low" or "weak" literacy skills, which were behind where they expected them to be at this point in their education. Brad said, "I believe in a rural setting there is a higher percentage of students who need literacy help when compared to suburban schools" (questionnaire). Sammi said literacy needs were not "different from urban students overall" but felt that "urban students are expected and put under pressure to be more literate where rural students are often expected to not be as such." She noted that rural students themselves were aware of these lower expectations and "some use that as an excuse to not try in school" (questionnaire). Participants lamented other challenges, including not being able to assign homework—attributed to lack of parental support and lack of access to technology—as well as other rural-specific challenges such as missing school during hunting and harvesting seasons.

To discuss perceived challenges runs the risk of reinscribing a deficit model of thinking about rural schools, but we position the perceived challenges of teacher candidates as opportunities to examine the contextual realities of rural places and how that context—along with the language to describe it—can influence practice. It can be uncomfortable to engage in the delicate work of entering into dialogue with our perceptions of other people and their cultural contexts.

However, this uncomfortable work is essential for growth. We cannot learn to challenge stereotypes, misconceptions, or prejudices without first entering into dialogue with them. If we shrink from them for fear of reifying them, we give them tacit control and risk allowing them to lurk "just below the surface of our intent" (Fecho, 2004, p. 69). Some challenges as perceived by teacher candidates were perhaps examples of their deficit thinking about rural students. For example, all the participants noted a lack of motivation as a major challenge and attributed this lack of motivation to the "ruralness" of these students. When describing this as a challenge, teacher candidates noted that students who had no plans for postsecondary education lacked motivation during class. However, this issue is surely not exclusively a rural one.

In contrast to this sort of deficit thinking was the challenge of poverty identified by the participants. To acknowledge that rural students often live in communities with limited resources and economic disadvantage is not enacting a deficit model of thinking. Rather, it is an example of a critical and reflective practitioner who is acknowledging the individual needs of students and searching for relevant pedagogies to meet those needs. For example, all the participants noted that their students came from lower socioeconomic groups, and that this situation influenced their teaching. Brad explained that the majority of his students did not have access to technology at home so it affected his beliefs about homework and assignments he gave to students. Teacher candidates noted that parents cared about their students' academic performance but lacked the knowledge or experience to advocate and support students in and outside school. In an effort to both prepare pre-service teachers for success in rural schools and minimize deficit thinking about rurality, we must be careful not to make labeling these contextual realities, like poverty, taboo.

Making Meaning

Organizing the data thematically made it possible for us to make sense of how the participants' personal histories and experiences as students and as interns in the role of teacher candidate have shaped them during their preparation to make the transition from teacher candidate to in-service teacher. Our dialogue with the data and with each other helped us synthesize themes into two key findings related to the preparation of teacher candidates to work and be successful in rural schools. The first key finding is that rural exposure or having a personal history in a rural school or community alone does not necessarily prepare one for success in rural schools. While being a "home grown" teacher or rural native makes a strong argument for eventual success in the rural classroom, it should not be assumed that this criterion is the only qualification needed for success.

Even though Sammi and Daniella (as rural natives) felt prepared to teach in rural schools, they identified student poverty and a lack of motivation as two challenges—as did Brad and Beth, nonrural natives. Beth addressed motivation on the questionnaire, and Sammi noted that students “struggled to see the purpose for doing classwork” and had “widespread levels of motivation.” These comments also tie directly into perceptions of motivation. In other words, having a rural background did not uniquely prepare them to address these challenges. Strategies that overemphasize a rural background may inadvertently serve to dismiss teacher candidates from suburban and urban areas who might desire to live in a rural community and teach rural students. It would be a mistake to assume that nonrural native teachers cannot be effective in the classroom, just as many teachers from rural or suburban upbringings find success in urban classrooms.

The second key finding is that teaching candidates need explicit instruction on theory and pedagogies for success in rural schools and to use personal histories or transform social capital into meaningful, relevant pedagogy. Daniella knew that she had a great deal in common with her students, such as driving a pickup truck, but she was able to extend that social capital and make use of insider knowledge by integrating place-based instructional strategies during her science classes. As teacher educators we want our own instruction to be relevant to our students and, in doing so, model relevant pedagogies. However, relevant pedagogies fall short of being meaningful without a critical lens.

Discussion

The perceptions shared by these pre-service teachers demonstrate the need for teacher educators to redouble our efforts to develop teacher preparation programs in which a culturally responsive pedagogy is integrated with content area pedagogy in order to help pre-service teachers attend to the *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that their students bring to the classroom, instead of focusing on perceived deficits. This result cannot occur without the creation of opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in dialogue with their perceptions of their students’ cultural contexts. In our experience, the pre-service teachers who grew up in rural areas bring a unique sensibility with them to their work in the classroom. The same can be said of pre-service teachers from urban environments. The Discourses (Gee, 2008) that inform our identities and home cultures can vary from house to house, family to family, farm to farm, and back alley to back alley. These subtle, yet important, differences need to be explored. Therefore, it is important to ensure that we prepare pre-service teachers to enter into dialogue with their students and learn to value, respect, and build on students’ individual cultural contexts. Providing

teacher candidates with the opportunity to interrogate how their students’ cultural contexts might differ from their own makes it possible for them to understand that it isn’t their personal history that matters nearly as much as what they do as teachers working within that cultural context.

Implications for Preparing Pre-Service Teachers in Rural Schools

Preparing pre-service teachers with pedagogical theory and meaningful experiences in rural field placements are important first steps in creating a pool of teachers from which rural districts can successfully recruit and *retain* teachers. We want to produce teacher candidates who have had thoughtful preparation, understand the benefits and challenges of teaching in a rural community, and can be effective and find personal and professional success and *stay* in rural schools. Preparing rural teachers means teaching about the “*significance* of place, and its relationship to other places and social practices” (White & Reid, 2008, p. 8) and ensuring that rural students have teachers who “understand the importance of place, value their lifeworlds, and building appropriate teaching and learning opportunities” (White & Reid, 2008, p. 9).

We recognize real challenges of rural communities and do not suggest these strategies would serve as a silver bullet, producing a cadre of readymade rural teachers. We do, however, believe that teacher preparation programs can do more to assist rural communities in recruitment efforts, and that providing explicit theoretical and pedagogical support to prepare teachers for rural schools may yield long-term benefits for rural communities.

Teacher education programs can also explore the nuanced complexities of rural education. Exposing pre-service teachers to a meaningful field experience is one aspect. Additionally, teacher candidates should have coursework that addresses rural learners. The participants in this study had completed a Content Area Reading course in which they discussed rural education and place-based pedagogies at length (along with other inclusive pedagogies). Additionally, they read “Ways of Being at Risk: The Case of Billy Charles Barnett” (Barone, 1989), viewed portions of *Country Boys* (Sutherland, 2005), and had opportunities to design disciplinary literacy instruction that would meet the needs of rural learners. They were also asked to reflect on their personal sense of place and how place identities influence their expectations and goals as future teachers. While these examples are limited, we encourage teacher educators to give pre-service teachers the space to reflect on rural education, to investigate how—and *why*—place influences young people, and to consider how they might meet the needs of those learners as rural teachers. Without providing a critical frame for

these conversations, pre-service teachers might default to negative perceptions that do not necessarily come from a space of critical examination, relying instead on perceptions about rural people and places.

Conclusion

The participants' descriptions of their experiences highlight an important issue related to preparing pre-service teachers to work in rural schools. These pre-service teachers articulated their concern that rural students struggled to meet typical grade-level literacy expectations. While this concern is by no means limited to a "rural issue," it does underscore the importance of staffing rural schools with highly skilled teachers. The participants felt connected to their students and used place-based pedagogies when possible but were unable to find ways to capitalize on those personal connections with the students to motivate them for academic (school-based literacy) purposes, making the point that while place may serve as a powerful curricular tool in the classroom, it does not suggest that all rural students conceptualize a given place in a singular way.

The strategies we offer are not an end point—they are not a to-do list of things that will guarantee success. Such a list is impossible to create because the individuals who populate classrooms (on all sides of the proverbial desk) will always be changing. Our practice and our classrooms cannot help but remain in a constant state of flux (Fecho, 2004). What these strategies can do is provide a road map that might help us navigate the complex terrain of making sense of the world around us as we attempt to connect with our students and help them connect with themselves, and, ultimately, their future students.

We designed this research project to gain further insights on preparing our own pre-service teachers for careers in rural schools and to enhance the existing literature related to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural communities. While certain amenities or other incentives may be beyond the scope of a rural school district already battling funding insufficiencies, teacher education programs can do their part in preparing future teachers for careers in rural education. The participants in this study allowed us to better understand the importance of the rural field placement, along with support for those teachers to explore their own sense of place and to examine how their personal context for learning informs concepts of place and rurality. We believe the findings and our discussion will help to frame and reframe culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher preparation programs to include the experiences for rural learners.

Moreover, we have embarked on two focused, follow-up studies of our English education program and how this current study might inform our practice as teacher educators

in preparing future English teachers. For example, in a Teaching Adolescent Readers course, students read *Of Mice and Men* with an explicit focus on rurality. In a methods course, students were asked to address the cultural context of rural students and examine potential deficit thinking by participating in a teaching inquiry using *To Kill a Mockingbird*, examining conceptions of rurality and poverty as illustrated in the novel.

A critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) across the disciplines provides an effective framework for teacher educators who intend to prepare content area teachers to meet the specific needs of rural learners. The major purpose of education for rural students, according to the 1944 White House Charter (Dawson & Hubbard, 1944), is to "achieve and sustain a desirable level of cultural, ethical, and economic living" (p. 33). With greater efforts made by teacher education programs, we can perhaps not only actualize that sentiment but make it a touchstone for rural teachers. By preparing pre-service teachers to enact a pedagogy of place, we can help them learn to create classroom communities that welcome each student's passions, interests, and specific experiences into the learning environment. When teachers bring the content being studied into dialogue with students' lives (Fecho, 2011), opportunities abound to actualize what Daniella articulated in her essay: to "make a clear, tangible difference in someone else's life."

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. Describe the school where you completed your student teaching.
2. Is this school similar to or different from the school you attended when you were in high school?
3. How would you describe or characterize your students?
4. Explain if and how the rural context influenced your teaching or student learning?
5. Did you feel prepared to teach in a rural setting? Would you feel more or less prepared to teach in a suburban or urban setting? Please explain.
6. What do you perceive as challenges to teaching in a rural school?
7. What do you perceive as benefits to teaching in a rural school?
8. How would you describe the literacy needs of rural students? Do you think those needs are different for suburban or urban students?