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Redesigning Field Experiences to Support Rural Schools

Vicki Sherbert

I vividly recall the preservice teachers' faces opposite me on the screen the night of our first class of the Fall 2020 semester. We were gathered virtually for our English Language Arts (ELA) methods and practicum course. The past few months had been hard—teeth-clenching, muscle-cramping, soul-draining hard—as we coped with a volatile social and political climate and navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. On this night, I believe we all craved connection and community as we faced the unknowns of the semester.

We began by listening to the song, “Many Roads,” written and performed by Andrew Peterson (2010). After the last refrain, we opened our notebooks and, for ten minutes, wrote our way into the night. Then, as we shared our thinking and writing, we spoke of places we came from and roads that led us to this semester. We described homes, hometowns, and schools and how these places had influenced our decisions to become teachers. I described my own journey as a student and educator from rural schools. Raised on a farm in a midwestern state, I attended classes in the same school building from kindergarten through 12th grade. After college, I returned to that community and taught in the same rural district for 28 years before becoming a teacher educator in higher education. As I spoke of the opportunities and challenges of learning and teaching in a rural setting, two undergraduates who had attended rural schools nodded in recognition. Others who had attended larger, suburban schools expressed frank amazement as they tried to imagine the context.

Issues of rurality have always been near to my heart. Looking back on my school years, I recall more positive than negative experiences. Most of my teachers who had served in our school for many years remained part of my life after graduation and followed my journey as I became an educator. These relationships played a role in my decision to return to the community and the district. I wanted to have similar relationships with my own students. I wanted to encourage them and be part of their lives, celebrating their successes as my teachers had celebrated mine. I knew there would be challenges. I knew rural schools were historically perceived as lacking diversity and often got lost in the shuffle as funding formulas favored larger districts. Rather than discouraging me, this motivated me.

In 2020, the fabric of rural communities was stretched thin. The social and political climate, with polarizing stances on everything from social justice to social distancing and mask-wearing mandates, brought stressors that were magnified for students, families, and educators in rural schools. Close-knit families in small communities found themselves grappling with unfamiliar divisions. Educators in small schools, already juggling multiple preps and several grade levels, were suddenly tasked with using technology to teach in multiple settings simultaneously.

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As our first-night conversations continued, worries surfaced that, while typical of most preservice teachers, had intensified for this particular group. They wondered if their field experiences would be in-person or remote. They expressed concern for teachers and students facing such an uncertain year. One said they would “totally get it” if a teacher “passed” on taking

a practicum student this semester because “everyone knows teachers already have too much on their plates right now.” I understood that concern. The traditional practicum consisted of an in-person placement for 30-40 hours during the semester in a middle or high school within driving distance of the university. However, for many districts and preservice teachers, in-person placements were not possible during the pandemic.

I realized that amidst these turbulent times, I had been given an unanticipated opportunity. I could, no, *I must*, reimagine the structure and scope of our field experiences. As always, I hoped to guide my preservice teachers from preparation into practice by collaborating with successful classroom teachers (Imig & Imig, 2006). A short time later, while seeking a new placement for a student teacher who needed to switch from an in-person to a remote classroom, I contacted a graduate of our program, Delaney, who teaches junior high and high school ELA classes in a rural school 300 miles from campus. A year ago, pre-pandemic, she expressed interest in welcoming student teachers and/or practicum students to her classroom. While I imagined this as a possibility for student teachers who might relocate to the area, I knew it was too far for practicum students to travel. However, Delaney was now serving her own students in in-person, remote, and hybrid settings and pivoting as students moved in and out of quarantine. Despite the complexity of this, she was eager to host a student teacher remotely. While working out the details, she asked, “What about your practicum kids? I’ll adopt them, too!” I realized immediately how special this collaboration would be. We had an opportunity for preservice teachers to experience the context of a rural school and to work with and support a passionate educator and her students in the midst of turbulent times.

So, we began the redesign of both internship and practicum placements. Nine preservice teachers (one student teacher and eight practicum students) connected remotely to this rural classroom to plan and collaborate with Delaney, participate in whole-class instruction, and work with individual students and small groups. Delaney opened her Zoom link each morning and the preservice teachers connected to the in-person classroom along with junior high and high school students participating remotely from their homes. The student teacher participated every day, and the practicum students joined in at scheduled times throughout the week. In traditional placements under normal circumstances, we avoid placing student teachers and practicum students in the same classroom. However, we reimaged the possibilities for shared planning, collaborative teaching, and mentorship. Delaney, with full support of her building principal and superintendent, welcomed the entire group to the classroom.

Reflecting on Redesigned Rural Field Experiences

The *NCTE Position Statement: Beliefs about Methods Courses and Field Experiences in Education* states, “English teacher education programs should structure opportunities for candidates to reflect on, unpack, and learn from their field experiences” (NCTE, 2021). After the semester ended, Delaney, the student teacher, two of the practicum students, and I met virtually to reflect on the redesigned field experience within the rural school’s unique context. Delaney and I acknowledged the struggle to provide rural field experiences and to make connections and build relationships among teacher educators and classroom teachers (Eckert & Petrone, 2013; Payne, et al., 2018). We asked the preservice teachers how to make rural placements more

appealing and how to better prepare them for working in rural schools. Their responses centered on ‘place’ and ‘relationships.’

In our methods course, we had explored place-conscious practices that consider the culture and demographics of communities different from one’s own (Reagan, et al., 2019). We discussed ways these practices provide opportunities to engage with school communities and address unique needs and attributes of rural schools (White & Reid, 2008). As we approached the complexities faced during this semester, we discussed the importance of understanding rurality and its impact on the lives of students in classrooms in rural communities (Corbett, 2010). This helped tie rural community contexts to the preservice teachers’ own prior knowledge as they designed learning experiences for students in this classroom (Ajayi, 2014).

In our conversation reflecting on the semester, Delaney described honest discussions she had with the preservice teachers about establishing relationships with students, while noting boundaries can be different in rural communities. Small communities often consist of extended families, and educators may find themselves interacting with their students and families outside of school. The nature of teaching in rural communities offers unique opportunities to know students well and to increase student engagement and teacher satisfaction (Barley, 2009). Two of the preservice teachers who had attended suburban high schools remarked they appreciated getting to know students in this classroom in ways that were not possible in their larger schools. They saw these close relationships and connections as positive attributes of rural teaching (Tran, et al., 2020). One preservice teacher expressed surprise at how well the students in the classroom listened and responded to them as they taught on Zoom. Delaney affirmed that once you connect with them, rural students tend to adapt and “go with the flow.” She noted her school is part of the state’s redesign project and one of the project’s pillars is real-world experience. She remarked, “So here are real-world college kids working to be teachers. This is a perfect example for my students to see somebody working on a degree. Yeah, they can look at my diploma on the wall all they want, but when they see real people working on their degree and what that takes, that’s big time.”

The student teacher and practicum students agreed that working together enhanced rather than detracted from their field experiences. They marveled at how comfortable they became co-teaching during lessons and activities. Delaney liked blending the field experiences because everyone was able to learn together and from each other. She referred to this as a pyramid of interaction that was familiar to teachers in rural schools.

We also reflected on opportunities to broaden rural students’ thinking. The preservice teachers described how being present in the classroom, even remotely, allowed them to “expand the bubble of [the rural students’] experiences.” They accomplished this by using literacy activities to help students view the world in new ways and consider ideas they might not have otherwise because of where they live (Corbett, 2010). By establishing trusting relationships, the preservice teachers were able to lead difficult class discussions addressing diversity (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2020). One expressed new awareness of the scope of diversity in rural communities. All appreciated the opportunities they had as future English Language Arts (ELA) teachers to expand multicultural voices heard by students through interacting with diverse texts (Eckert & Petrone, 2013). It warmed my heart when they talked about the relevance of theory and

pedagogy examined during their coursework on campus. They were grateful their undergraduate experiences had focused on more than just curriculum and planning. One observed, “You’re not just there to teach kids how to write a sentence grammatically correct...you’re there to teach kids how to live in this world and how to live in this world *better* than we do right now.”

Delaney said having reflective conversations such as this with preservice teachers was important to her as a mentor (Reagan, 2019; Rehrauer, et al., 2004). As this conversation came to a close, the preservice teachers stated that engaging in this rural field experience, even remotely, caused them to think positively about teaching in a rural community (Azano, 2015; White & Kline, 2012). One of them accepted a teaching position in a rural district; another, from a suburban community, accepted a student teaching placement in a rural school.

Ongoing Reflection

The circumstances of Fall 2020 plunged educators everywhere into uncharted waters. Suddenly we could no longer be tethered to “the way we’ve always done things.” What began as a dilemma became an unimagined opportunity to redesign ELA field experiences to benefit, not only preservice teachers in our program, but also a teacher and students in a rural school. I recognize the attributes of rural schools that made this redesign possible. Throughout my own journey, I have encountered many rural teachers and students willing to help each other, try new ideas, and yes, “take on one more thing.” Because of the willingness of this teacher to open the virtual doors of her classroom, these preservice teachers glimpsed what it means to teach in a rural school and witnessed first-hand the influence of place and the priority of relationships. As a teacher educator, I am excited about new and ongoing collaborations bringing redesigned field experiences to rural schools in the best and worst of times.

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