

## Why Rural Schools Are Important for Pre-Service Teacher Preparation

Brooke Blanks  
Holly Robbins  
Dana Rose  
Radford University

Loren Beasley  
Michelle Greene  
Melissa Kile  
Auburn Elementary School

Allison Broadus  
Radford University

### ***Abstract***

*Rural schools are often overlooked in educational research. At least one in five children in the United States attends a rural school and one-third of all public schools are located in rural areas. Research on the effects of teacher education in rural schools on teacher candidates and the rural schools themselves is almost nonexistent. This position paper is an essay in which university faculty and our cooperating teacher partners from a rural elementary school describe the strengths-based lens through which we view the rural school as an important and effective context for preparing future teachers.*

## **Why Rural Schools Are Important for Pre-service Teacher Preparation**

Rural schools are often overlooked in teacher preparation research. Specifically, the importance of rural field experience placements for pre-service teachers has not been explicitly or thoroughly explored in the literature. We think this is unfortunate because the importance of “place” is well documented in educational research. For instance, we have a rich literature exploring importance of the urban environment on schools, instruction, and teacher preparation from multiple perspectives (Hammerness & Matsko, 2012; Jablon, 2012; Taymans, Tindle, Freund, Ortiz, & Harris, 2012). Thus far, the vast majority of research on teacher preparation for schools in rural settings has been limited to discussions of the challenges rural districts face attracting and retaining high quality teachers (Fraser, 2007) or solutions to problems such as technologies to help busy faculty members supervise interns in rural schools from a distance (Falconer & Lignugaris-Kraft, B., 2002). In preparation for writing this essay, we struggled to find articles celebrating the unique strengths and mutual benefits of rural schools/ university partnerships for teacher preparation programs. Instead, the small body of research focused on rural education focuses on the challenges rural schools face due to poverty and geographic isolation.

To some extent this gap in the literature may reflect a historical deficit view of rural schools. Beginning with the Normal School movement of the 1840s to Teacher Corps in the 1960s-1970s to the current program, Teach for America, politicians and academics invested in teacher education have largely described rural schools only as places of significant need. If historically rural schools have been primarily understood as places of great cultural, socio-cultural, and educational poverty, it is unsurprising that little work has been done to understand how rural schools might contribute to effective teacher preparation. If one thinks that rural schools are inherently deficient, why would anyone want to prepare pre-service teachers there?

Our essay is a position paper to offer an alternative view of rural schools and their role in teacher preparation. We believe that a singular deficit perspective of rural schools and inattention to

their potential contributions to teacher preparation is both unfair and problematic. Many of the dispositional qualities and problem-solving skills we want to develop in 21st Century teachers are, of necessity, simply part of how we do business in rural schools and communities. Problem solving, family-centered practice, community engagement are all part of our day-to-day rural life in Appalachia. We wish to make an incremental contribution to the rural school literature by sharing our lived experiences preparing pre-service teachers in rural schools. We find that rural school placements help us address important issues in teacher preparation including opportunities to develop teacher candidates' cultural competencies and exploring the mutual benefits of university/community school partnerships. We also believe that strengths-based research on rural schools is underrepresented in the teacher preparation literature.

Perhaps we academics who are involved in rural education are somewhat to blame. Many of us tend to work at teacher colleges and universities with 4-4 teaching loads, a professional life that leaves little time to write and publish. When we do publish about our research and progress in rural education, we focus on strategies and skills for school improvement. Also, we "preach to the choir", often choosing to focus on disseminating results to like-minded academics in one of the three professional journals dedicated to rural education (Coladarcci, 2007).

We believe it is time for change. Rural education matters. Teacher preparation in rural schools matters. At least one in five children in the United States attend rural schools and one-third of all public schools are located in rural areas (Johnson & Strange, 2005, p.3). Because of our historic roots in the Normal School movement, many teacher colleges and universities with significant teacher preparation programs are located in or near rural school districts (Fraser, 2007). Yet, research on the effects of teacher education in rural schools on teacher candidates and the rural schools themselves is almost nonexistent. When rural schools and teacher education are discussed together in the literature it is nearly always in the context of using alternative entry programs such as Teach for America to rescue, revitalize, or reinvent the perceived deficits of existing rural schools, rural teachers, and rural students (Fraser, 2007). As teacher educators from a regional state university in Appalachia and cooperating

teachers from a rural elementary school, we acknowledge the importance of research that identifies and addresses the many challenges that exist in rural schools. However, we also see a need for work that articulates the many positive contributions that rural schools and rural field placements can make to our collective understanding of best practices in teacher education. Our purpose is to share our experiences preparing student teachers in a rural placement so as to more accurately represent the complexities of rural education and teacher education therein. In this essay university faculty and our cooperating teacher partners from a rural elementary school use a strengths-based lens to explain why we believe the rural school is a particularly important and effective context for preparing future teachers. We hope our work can inform and inspire future empirical research in rural teacher preparation. (Please note: To alleviate potential confusions, in this essay the terms pre-service teacher, student teacher, teacher candidate, and intern are used interchangeably.)

### **Who We Are**

We are faculty members from a university-based teacher preparation program, preK-5 public school cooperating teachers from a rural partnership school in Appalachia, and a student in the pre-service teacher education program. We have partnered for over a decade to prepare general and special education teachers, support ongoing school improvement and mutual professional development among university- and school-based faculty. Our essay describes why we believe rural schools are particularly well suited to these tasks. First, we explain how the rural school where we place our teacher candidates is consistent with best practices in teacher preparation. Second, we describe the valuable lessons our pre-service teachers learn about cultural diversity from their placements in a rural field experience. Third, we explore the ways in which placing pre-service teachers in a rural school benefits the school. Finally, we celebrate the implications our position for teacher preparation programs, rural and other.

*Disclaimer:* We embrace our love of rural schools and are proud to acknowledge our bias. We believe that we produce excellent teacher candidates because of the opportunities we offer our students to enact their student teaching in our rural

partnership school. We wish to add our voices the professional literature and document our experiences that suggest that rural schools can have strengths as well as needs. We celebrate the many positive aspects of rural schools that make them great placements for student teachers. We hope that after reading our essay, you will also.

### **A Rural Placement Can Support Best Practices in Teacher Preparation**

Pre-service teachers straddle two worlds during their field experiences. They simultaneously enact the dual roles of student and teacher (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The transition from university student to professional teacher is a change in identity that is deeply rooted in both the acts of teaching these pre-service teachers observe and commit in these field experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Like the master for the apprentice, the cooperating teacher is the primary source of professional support for pre-service teachers during this critical period of professional identity formation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Teacher educators need to find placements in which pre-service teachers' professional practices, expertise, and behaviors can evolve over time (Lave, 1991) with ongoing support from highly effective cooperating professionals and the school community. We find this in our rural school student teacher placements.

Pre-service teachers are embraced in our school at all times. They are in our school full time. This is a time where our pre-service teachers are fully immersed in our school and feel the support that is true to our school and unique community. (Lisa. kindergarten teacher).

The literature exploring best practices in pre-service teachers' supervision is growing and represents diverse theoretical orientations and practical perspectives (Bates & Burbank, 2008; Falconer & Lignugaris, 2002). There is however, general agreement as to its importance and purpose; to provide pre-service teachers with guided practice in authentic contexts (Koury, Ludlow, & Weinke, 1991; McDevitt, 1996; Russell, Williams, & Gold, 1992). Ideally, pre-service teachers have

ongoing professional relationships with university faculty and their cooperating teachers (Giebelhaus, 1995). University-based supervisors should be knowledgeable of the pedagogy pre-service teachers learn in methods courses and familiar enough with cooperating teachers classrooms and schools to engineer placements where the pre-service teachers receive sufficient guided practice with methods to achieve mastery (Bloom, 1968; Clift & Brady, 2005).

As a pre-service teacher that went through a rural school system for my education training, the opportunities that were provided to me were invaluable. I had the opportunity to be placed in a yearlong cohort and develop lasting relationships with teachers and staff at the school. I learned how to do numerous things that text books did not tell me about teaching! I had to collaborate with education professionals on how to set up a classroom, how to plan effective instruction, what to do when you have behavior problem, and how do you challenge that gifted learner? We had to solve problems in ways that made sense for individual students and their families. The hands on experience of working with students every day gave me the chance to administer assessments and monitor students' academic growth. I was able to attend before and after school activities and become a part of the community. The teachers were amazing mentors and went the extra mile to ensure success for pre-service teachers (Megan, first grade teacher).

We enact these research-based practices for teacher preparation in our partnership with our rural elementary school. Because of low teacher turnover and a long-term partnership, we know our cooperating teachers and the surrounding community well. We share similar values related to inclusive practices and the idea that teaching is hard work. We work together to interpret evidence-based practices for use in our local classrooms and to tailor instructional approaches for individual classrooms and students.

Some days the pre-service teachers are in the classroom all day. Other days they spend half a day in our classroom and they remainder of the day in a classroom in our school

learning from university professors. This allows the university to create lessons and opportunities that are catered to our school and our school needs. (Lisa, kindergarten teacher).

Our cooperating teachers are invested in producing high-quality novice teachers and they take their roles seriously. They attend the student teachers' weekly seminars to ground what our student teachers learn from coursework in effective instructional practices based on their years of lived professional experiences. Seminar topics include theory and practice in lesson planning, classroom management, explicit instruction, guided discovery, working with parents, professional collaboration, universal design for learning, co-teaching, and more.

As a veteran teacher who has had interns from other universities in (other states), and who has been a part of this (University/Elementary School) partnership since its inception in 1997, I feel the (partnership) is unique. Pre-service teachers (interns) are placed in our school for most of the school year. The first benefit of this placement is interns have access to our beginning-of-the-year processes, including home visits, Open House for families before school starts, and the teaching of routines & procedures during the first two weeks of school. Interns see real-life and real-time applications of strategies and concepts for starting the school year, which they are learning in (university) coursework. (Meredith, second grade teacher).

## **Benefits of Rural School Field Placement for Student Teachers**

The term 'rural' implies a peaceful, pastoral setting with lush green fields of corn and adjacent woods. We may envision a farm family gathered 'round a Norman Rockwell dinner table heaped with corn on the cob, fresh tomatoes, steaming potatoes, and blue lake green beans seasoned with bacon. The family is seeking the American dream by supporting itself on the land and promoting their children's future through a public-school education – in a school not far from their farmland. Life is rich here.

This is not the setting where we place our teacher candidates in rural schools.

Instead, we find our schools to be welcoming children and families who are rarely attached to the land for their entire income or livelihood. Families in our rural school are a mixture of mostly working and middle class folks and a few professionals who are choosing to live in the country close to their work.

Yes, there are rolling fields and woods, and we hear roosters crowing and cows mooing as we drive up the school's driveway, but these images belie the reality of most of the children who come to our rural schools. When we take our candidates on a school bus trip along the bus route so that they understand their students' lives, there is silence on the bus as their eyes took in the impoverished settings of many of the school's families. They see from the bus window a few homes that were still without sewer services, not 20 minutes from their dorm rooms.

Our accrediting institutions require that our candidates gain experience with children from diverse settings. Our rural schools do not include large numbers of ethnically and racially diverse families. However, research tells us that the most common thread among students who "struggle" with school is not race or ethnicity. Rather, the determinant for "struggle" is poverty. It is commonly assumed that we can find major centers of poverty in urban centers, and this is true. However, urban poverty does not negate the reality of rural poverty and the value of understanding it. Our students who are placed in rural schools gain invaluable knowledge about how poverty impacts learning and how they can positively influence student learning despite the odds. Therefore, their rural school experiences are relevant and help develop the skills and dispositions they need for culturally responsive practice. Here are one student teacher's thoughts on how this rural placement helped her learn about meeting diverse needs in her future classroom.

Growing up in [one of the wealthiest suburban communities in the United States] affected my views on how other people live. After being use to the affluent lifestyle of the upper and middle class, my experiences in this rural school came as a shock . . . Within the first week of my internship I quickly learned that a student's



socioeconomic status truly affects his/her learning environment. I was able to experience how the lack of economic security affects a child's ability to learn and 'take-in' school physically, socially and emotionally. This past semester some of my students said that they couldn't afford school supplies; they wouldn't be able to pay a few dollars for a field trip, or even get sponsored for a school wide relay for life by family members. As future educators it is important to focus on how to address socioeconomic diversity. Student teachers need to learn how to discuss and differentiate lessons based on both special education needs and the economic needs of a classroom. The more aware and receptive a teacher is to the specific needs of a child, the better able they will be to teach. (Allie, student teacher).

What do our teacher candidates learn?

They learn how to create inclusive settings that welcome working and middle class families along with professional families – who all choose to live in rural settings and who are thus not segregated in neighborhood schools.

Our candidates can see how poverty marginalizes people from the mainstream American dream. They gain real experience with real families who are faced with all the associated issues that poverty creates –mobility from job-to-job with school-to-school changes, the struggle for basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, and sewer which can lead to homelessness, the impossibilities associated with health care and health issues, and the complexity of how mental health issues are both an influence on and a result of living with poverty.

They can see how families work hard to earn a living and how this hard work at 2-3 jobs often keeps families away from school and away from providing the support educators expect from families.

Our candidates learn how the illegal drug manufacturing and trafficking market in rural settings influences children's stability or lack of stability.

Our candidates then witness how skilled, committed, and compassionate teachers make every effort to make connections to families in need. Teachers alter their schedules for family conferences to provide alternate times that do not conflict with families' multiple work schedules. Teachers visit kindergarteners

in their homes during the summer to make school seem safe and welcoming. Teachers buy supplies and support weekend backpack programs that deliver food to families.

We believe we must support our candidates in examining their interpretations of families' lives so that they do not finish their internship with negative assumptions about the families they serve. Therefore, during their internship experience, we support their thinking by guiding them not to stereotype all the families living in poverty by these examples. Together, we analyze our own biases and how they might influence our sensibilities to make judgments about families.

What is the relevance of learning from rural schools? In our case, many of our students will return to rural schools in our region, so their internship experiences prepares them for their real world. For those that return to a more 'privileged' suburban school, our candidates return to those settings with a more complete understanding of how challenging it is for people who are marginalized by poverty. Our students who find teaching positions in urban and diverse settings - they have a more nuanced understanding of how people's identities and potential are diminished by poverty often through no fault of their own.

Multicultural education scholars want teacher candidates to gain experiences with "other people's children" (Delpit, 2006). In truth, our candidates do get the experience of teaching children who are different from themselves. There are certainly more mainstream schools in our university region with which we could create a partnership alignment for our placements. These teacher candidates might experience some "ideal" classroom settings, but of course, we find ourselves always committed to preparing teachers to teach ALL children, not just those who live in privileged or mainstream settings.

### **Benefits to Our Rural School Partner**

While funding disparities among rural schools and their urban/suburban counterparts have been reduced, these disparities have not been erased completely. Rural schools are usually found in low property-wealth districts (Weldon, 2011). The struggle for funding equity and adequacy continues to challenge teachers and administrators working in rural schools to

do more with less in order to comply with legislation such as the *No Child Left Behind* initiative.

Each cohort in our teacher preparation program consists of approximately 20 teacher candidates. Depending on the number of classroom teachers eligible to mentor teacher candidates, we are able to place an entire cohort in one or two rural schools. This concentration of teacher candidates allows us to mitigate some of the challenges faced by rural schools and benefits these schools in several unique ways.

### *Attracting Highly-Qualified Teachers*

One of the challenges facing rural schools is the NCLB highly-qualified teacher stipulation (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Typically drawing a smaller pool of applicants for teaching positions, attracting and retaining highly-qualified teachers to rural areas is a challenge. Rural school districts may not have the resources to devote to recruiting on a scale commensurate with the recruiting efforts of larger school districts. Pedagogical brain-drain is discussed in the research literature as a phenomenon through which the brightest individuals in a small or rural community migrate to more metropolitan areas in search of healthier labor markets and greater opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Gibbs, 2005; Mathis, 2003; Sherman & Sage, 2011). Prospective teachers cite fear of social and cultural isolation, more modest benefits and salary packages, and less access to professional development opportunities for their reluctance to pursue teaching in rural schools (Osterholm, Horn, & Johnson, 2006).

For the schools with whom we work, we offer a steady stream of highly qualified applicants and a yearlong “courtship” period that enables school administrators to observe potential candidates’ actual instruction. Our teacher candidates experience a yearlong immersion experience in rural school culture that may allay the typical fears cited in the literature as aversive side effects of working in rural schools. Teacher candidates experience the benefits of rural schools consistent with those cited by Osterholm, Horn, and Johnston (2006) such as fewer disciplinary issues, lower cost of living, and heightened status within a tight-knit community. The schools with whom we work now have a strong contingency of our program graduates who can serve as mentors to the next generation of teachers.

As the school year progresses, having interns in the classroom impacts student learning in various ways. Student-teacher ratios are reduced, offering the opportunity for immediate remediation for struggling students, or for enrichment activities for advanced learners. There are extra pairs of eyes in the classroom to monitor behavior issues and academic progress. Having a second or third adult in the classroom allows students to form a relationship with another positive role model, besides the cooperating teacher. Interns can learn more about the assessment process by observing students and recording data to share with the cooperating teacher (Meredith, second grade teacher).

### *Tutoring Program as RtI – Tier II Support*

Many rural schools do not have the resources to implement a multi-tiered model of Response to Intervention, often because they lack an available pool of candidates to hire as intervention specialists and/or the resources to train and monitor the RtI implementation. The rural schools in which we place our interns are able to leverage the concentrated number of teaching interns for use in implementing a multi-tiered approach to instructional intervention in reading. A twice-weekly, before-school tutoring program for fourth- and fifth-grade students offers assessment-driven and highly-individualized support in reading. Students who perform below grade level on state-level assessments and do not qualify for additional support through special education services are selected for participation in the tutoring program. University faculty provide professional development for teacher candidates and ensure the fidelity of implementation in the Response to Intervention model. Now in our tenth year of implementation, the tutoring program plays a large role in supporting our rural partnership schools with their Tier II supplemental instruction. In fact, our rural school partner has been recognized as a Distinguished Title I school two years in a row.

### *Increasing Instructional Intensity*

Using co-teaching models, our teacher candidates enable the rural schools in which they are placed to increase the instructional intensity through reducing teacher-student ratios. Professional

development seminars on co-teaching models and options are offered for both the teacher candidates and the practicing teachers throughout the schools. Using models such as station teaching, alternate teaching, parallel teaching, and one teach/one collect data (Friend, 2007), typical whole-group instruction can be modified to make effective use of all adults in the classroom to support diverse learner needs. Monthly seminar meetings are used to discuss the strengths and challenges involved in co-teaching and to provide a forum for school- and university-based personnel to learn from each other, contributing to mutual professional development.

Interns also bring in current teaching strategies, which veteran teachers may not have had time to research or experience. Certainly, one advantage is the younger generation's familiarity with the newest technologies, which can be incorporated into teaching and learning in many different ways (Meredith, second grade teacher).

### **Our Program**

The literature on pre-service teacher preparation describes many barriers to effective pre-service teacher education in the following domains: lack of money, shortages of qualified K-12 personnel (Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, and Terhanian, 1998), a lack of well-trained university supervisors (Falconer & Lignuris-Kraft, 2002), difficulty establishing, explicit, clear connections between methods courses and field placements (Bates & Burbank, 2008;), geographic proximity (Dymond, Renzaglia, Halle, Chadsey, & Bentz, 2008;), and an increase in distance learning as paths to certification (Mercer, 2004; Sun, Bender, & Fore, 2003). We reject these so-called barriers in our program. Simply put, we *choose* to structure our teacher preparation program to overcome common barriers described in the research. Although far from perfect, we believe that our choices result in well-prepared, ethical, competent novice teachers who are invested in their own professional development, their students, and their community. For the remainder of this essay we describe the choices we make to enact our rural school/teacher preparation program work and why we believe this is the right way to enact teacher education.

We invest in student teaching and supervision. We pay full-time, tenured or tenure-track professors to teach undergraduate methods classes and to supervise pre-service teachers at a time when many colleges and universities use graduate students, adjunct faculty, or other personnel for this work. We see this as the best investment we can make in our students' future professional successes. As a regional university we have ongoing relationships with our cooperating teachers. In fact, several of our cooperating teachers are alumnae from our programs. We attend professional development activities with our cooperating teachers as participants and co-presenters. University faculty and cooperating teachers communicate nearly every day (in person, over email, by phone) about our pre-service teachers' performances in their placements. University faculty are in schools 3-4 days a week. Our jobs are structured such that student teacher supervision is a "course" in our four-four teaching load. In a time of increasing interest in "distance learning" models of teacher preparation, we (university faculty and cooperating teachers) embrace the time and effort it takes to prepare effective teachers "the old-fashioned way"; immediate corrective feedback, high expectations, consistent reinforcement, all of which are made possible by significant personal investments of time and energy in pre-service teacher candidates, teachers, schools, communities, and most importantly, kids. Is it worth the effort? Absolutely!

## **Conclusion**

In closing, we offer the perspectives of two of our cooperating teachers. Megan is an alumna of our university, an early career first grade teacher, and a cooperating teacher for our program. Lisa is an experienced kindergarten teacher and a veteran cooperating teacher. In this essay we have tried to add underrepresented voices and represent an oft-missing perspective to the teacher preparation and rural school discourse. We believe they say it well.

After spending a year at the school and being a part of an amazing cohort, I was hired in the same school and continued my education in a Master's degree program. I now have the opportunity to mentor pre-service teachers

and provide the same opportunities to them that were provided to me! (Megan, first grade teacher).

We are very lucky to have the school/university partnership. Our school benefits from the help and knowledge of our pre-service teachers. Our pre-service teachers and the university benefit from our unique community and the opportunity to be immersed in a great school environment (Lisa, kindergarten teacher).

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