

## **Confronting Challenges at the Intersection of Rurality, Place, and Teacher Preparation: Improving Efforts in Teacher Education to Staff Rural Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in rural schools is a persistent struggle in many countries, including the U.S. While rural education researchers have long lamented the struggle to recruit and retain teachers, there is relatively little known about intentional efforts to prepare teachers, specifically, for rural classrooms. Salient challenges related to poverty, geographic isolation, low teacher salaries, and a lack of community amenities seem to trump perks of living in rural communities. Recognizing this issue as a complex and hard to solve fixture in the composition of rural communities, we sought to understand how teacher preparation programs might better prepare preservice teachers for successful student teaching placements and, ideally, eventual careers in rural schools. In this study, we explore teacher candidates' perceptions of rurality while examining how specific theory, pedagogy, and practice influence their feelings of preparedness for working in a rural school. Using pre- and post-questionnaire data, classroom observations, and reflections, we assess the effectiveness of deliberate efforts in our teacher preparation program to increase readiness for rural teaching. In our analysis and discussion, we draw on critical and sociocultural theories to understand the experiences of a cohort of teacher candidates as they explore personal histories, the importance of place, expectations, and teaching strategies for rural contexts. We conclude our article with recommendations for enhancing teacher preparation programs in ways that might result in significant progress toward the goal of staffing rural schools with the highly skilled teachers all students deserve.

### **Keywords**

Rural education, teacher education, English education, place-based education

“I’m not rural. I don’t know how  
I will relate to the students.”  
–Jenny

Jenny’s<sup>1</sup> anxiety about teaching in a rural school, as a non-rural native, captures one of many struggles in recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers in rural schools. Her response to a survey, given during her English Education program, represents a concern that growing up in a non-rural environment will limit one’s effectiveness as a teacher in a rural school and, thus, one’s sense of preparedness for doing so. This perception, among others, represents one of the many challenges facing rural communities seeking to staff their schools with adept teachers (Azano & Stewart, 2015). Advantages for teaching in a rural school, such as small class sizes and community closeness, fall short as true incentives for recruiting highly qualified teachers (Barley & Brigham, 2008; Monk, 2007), while other challenges related to poverty, geographic isolation, lower teacher salaries, and a lack of community amenities (Miller, 2012) seem to trump the potential perks of living in a rural area.

We recognize that, as teacher educators, we are not in a position to immediately address these larger challenges. We can, however, engineer significant changes within the construct of our teacher preparation program in terms of preparing teachers for success in rural schools. By enabling preservice teachers to see beyond their apprenticeships of observation (Lortie, 1975) and helping them learn to make dialogue, place, and culture the touchstones of their teaching practices, we believe that we can make significant progress toward staffing rural schools with high quality teachers – regardless of where they grew up – who can engage students in meaningful learning experiences.

## Theoretical Framework

At the center of our English Education program is a focus on helping preservice teachers learn to enact a dialogic pedagogy (Stewart, 2010), which requires focused efforts by teachers to bring the content being studied into dialogue with students’ lives (Fecho, 2011a). Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of language forms the foundation for a pedagogy based on dialogue. His concept of *heteroglossia* focused on the ways that words and their meanings are shaped by the context and contexts in which they have been used. He argued the “social atmosphere of the word, the atmosphere that surrounds the object makes the facets of the image sparkle” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 277). For Bakhtin, words, in living conversation, are directly “oriented toward a future answer-word” (p. 280). The connection causes understanding to be directly linked to response. Simply put, understanding and response are dependent upon one another, which means that both the speaker and the listener directly influence the meaning of any utterance. Therefore, meaning making cannot occur without this dialogue between speaker and listener.

We apply this theory to teaching and learning to highlight the importance of not placing teachers and school-based literacies in privileged positions. Instead, we seek to flatten hierarchies and make it clear that preservice teachers and the students they teach have *funds of knowledge* (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that can make learning and teaching dynamic, engaging, and meaningful, while still addressing the curricular demands teachers encounter in standards era classrooms (Stewart, 2012; Fecho, 2011a). We bring this theoretical underpinning

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to our work because we believe that connecting curricula to students' individual cultures is a vital element of teaching and learning, especially in the context of place-based education. Maxine Greene's (1978) belief that students should be able "to encounter curriculum as a possibility" (p. 18) guides our efforts as we work to help our preservice teachers craft units. We want them to see content as a tool that helps students think deeply, instead of the content being a decontextualized set of goals to attain. Moreover, we believe a focus on *place* is critical in this process. Place-based pedagogy refers to educational practices seeking to tie the realities of place and students' lives to meaningful instruction, particularly for the purpose of student engagement (Azano, 2011). Paul Theobald (1997) writes about place-conscious education as a scaffold to make meaning of what he also recognized as the "decontextualized stuff" of schooling. This framework shapes our efforts to make students' lives and individual cultural contexts a starting point for the exploration of literature, writing, and dialogue.

### **Our Stance**

Although we might not have had the language of these theories at our disposal, we developed these beliefs about learning and teaching long before we became teacher educators as a result of our personal backgrounds and experiences as students in teacher preparation programs. Amy grew up in the Appalachian foothills of Virginia in an economically depressed rural community. Her preparation to become a teacher, however, was at a major, urban university, where she eventually began her teaching career. Her experiences as an "urban teacher" served as a sharp contrast to having been a "rural student." Trevor had the opposite experience. He grew up in urban Maryland and was prepared as an English teacher in rural North Carolina, where

he began his teaching career in a one-stoplight Appalachian town. These experiences significantly influence our beliefs about culturally responsive pedagogy. Yes, our place identities and upbringings shaped our knowing of the world. However, our master's level teaching preparation and early teaching careers in environments significantly different from our "home" environments reshaped that knowing. Now, as teacher educators, we understand how crucial it is that preservice teachers understand the nuances of place and culture.

### **Embracing and Exploring Difference**

The methods courses in our English Education program draw on critical (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 1970) and sociocultural theories (Gee, 2008) to facilitate the development of classrooms where "literacy is used to immerse teacher and students in an ongoing reflective conversation with the texts of their lives" (Fecho, 2011b, p. 5). We take this stance because we believe that learning is dependent on dialogue. Engaging in discussion and seeing meaning making as a collaborative activity engenders possibilities for creativity and wonder to guide students and teachers as they encounter texts in the English classroom. This process is facilitated when teachers build units of instruction and individual lessons focused on *conceptual units* (Smagorinsky, 2008) that engage students in meaningful dialogue and connect their home cultures with curricular goals. As students engage in dialogue with texts and with each other, understanding merges with response to make new meaning. Instead of reifying accepted meanings, symbols can be called into question. This dialogic space not only honors the home cultures shaping students' understanding of concepts, but also provides a critical frame for interrogating *how* and *why* those cultural influences shape interpretations.

## Methods

### Context of Study

This study represents our efforts to understand how teacher educator programs might better prepare preservice teachers for success in rural schools. We have two questions guiding this inquiry. First, what are teacher candidates' perceptions of rurality? Second, how can teacher preparation programs prepare preservice English teachers for success in rural schools? As a teacher preparation program at a land-grant university geographically situated in Appalachia, we feel it is our responsibility to address this pressing need in rural communities. We hope by understanding students' perceptions of reality and how our efforts to prepare preservice teachers for work in rural schools are or are not influencing candidates, that we can make critical decisions in shaping the program to somehow turn the tide on a longstanding and stubborn problem in rural education.

### English Education Program and Participants

We conducted this study with the students in the English Education program at a large, research intensive, university in rural Appalachia with access to multiple urban and rural school districts. Our program employs a cohort model, and preservice teachers typically complete internships in both rural and urban schools in the final year of their program. We recruited a purposeful sample (Maxwell, 2005) of students who were in the final year of the program. All 11 students in the cohort, comprised of eight female and three male White students, elected to participate in the study. These students all have a bachelor's degree in English and are nearing completion of their master's in education and

secondary licensure program in English Education. During the fall semester, students were enrolled in two English education courses and a practicum. In the spring, they were completing their student teaching requirement and enrolled in their final methods course. This enabled us to study any potential shifts in their perceptions of teaching in rural schools based on what they were learning in their methods courses and internships. Additionally three students (two male and one female) from next year's cohort, who were enrolled in one of the English education methods courses, completed the pre-questionnaire survey (as described in the data generation section).

### Elements of English Education Courses

During the fall semester, the participants took a course, Methods I, focused specifically on instructional design and lesson planning in the English education classroom. During this course, students studied planning practices based on Smagorinsky's (2008) work with conceptual units. This focus was directly connected with seminars discussing Derrick Jensen's (2004) text *Walking on Water* and Fecho's (2011b) *Writing in the Dialogical Classroom* in order to scaffold the preservice teachers' efforts to learn how to teach from a dialogic stance. Students were encouraged to question the traditional role of the teacher as sources of knowledge and view themselves as collaborators or co-conspirators in the construction of knowledge (Appleman, 2000). From this perspective, the participants crafted lessons and units plans and put them into action during their field placements.

Also during the fall semester, students were enrolled in Teaching Adolescent Readers (TAR) in which Amy incorporated a focus on issues related to teaching in rural schools. Throughout the semester students were

challenged to consider how *place*, as a context for one's home culture, influences the reading of a particular text. For example, rurality was one of the major themes in the discussion of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Students considered how marginalized places influenced and continue to influence the interpretation of "the American Dream." Of note, this is the second course students have taken with Amy. In the previous course (Comprehension and Content Area Reading), students viewed portions of *Country Boys* (Sutherland, 2005) and read "Ways of Being at Risk: The Case of Billy Charles Barnett" (Barone, 1989). This previous experience gave the class a certain context for discussions about rural education. The subject of Barone's case study, "Billy Charles," was an expert on coonskins and making turtle soup, and the article described the ways in which the school curriculum failed him. Often class discussions would reflect on these texts with a question like, "How would we engage Billy Charles with this text?"

In the final course in our English education sequence, Methods II, we draw upon Meyer and Sawyer's (2006) practice of inquiry seminars to engage students in "Problem-Posing Seminars." As part of our efforts to help preservice teachers make the transition from teacher candidate to practicing teacher, we strive to create opportunities for them to engage in dialogue with one another to address the challenges they are encountering in their student teaching placements. The participants were required to craft lesson and unit plans that put the abstract ideas of a dialogic pedagogy into practice in each of the courses in the sequence. During Methods II, specifically, the participants created lessons focused on writing learning goals that required making connections between the classroom context and students' lives outside of school. These lessons provided students with

concrete experiences of putting this theory into practice and enabled them to work together to think about how to address the complexities they were encountering in their placements. Meyer and Sawyer (2006) noted the importance of supporting students as they learn to participate in communities of practice that "foster interdependence, peer support, reflectivity, multiple perspectives, and dialogue" (p. 49). We drew on their framework for engaging in inquiry seminars to develop a Problem-Posing Protocol (see Appendix A), which would help teacher candidates focus on specific issues and regard their peers as a support network for navigating the challenges they were encountering in their placements. We began this semester by modeling a Problem-Posing Seminar, focused specifically on teaching in a rural school, which we discuss later in this article. This seminar created an opportunity for us to further understand how students were applying the concept of cultural relevance and its application for teaching in a rural school.

### **Data Generation**

Consistent with our social constructionist theoretical framework, which privileges dialogue and the joint construction of knowledge, we employed multiple modes of data generation to ensure that the participants had multiple opportunities to share their insights and perceptions in three, distinct phases (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In our initial orientation phase, we administered a pre-questionnaire during the fall semester (see Appendix B) to develop a basis of understanding of students' perceptions of rurality and comfort level with the prospect of teaching in a rural school. Based on what we learned from that initial questionnaire, we moved to our second phase of "focused exploration" by designing a model Problem-Posing seminar to focus discussion

related to a potential challenge of teaching in a rural school (see Appendix C). Amy attended Trevor's Methods II course and led the first Problem-Posing seminar as a model early in the spring semester. This seminar was observed and transcribed by a graduate research assistant. Finally, at the mid-point of the spring semester, we conducted phase three of our data generation, member checks and closure, by asking participants to write short answer reflections (see Appendix D) designed to gauge their take-aways from these experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

We employed a recursive method for data analysis and used analytic induction (Erickson, 1986) to make sense of the data. After each phase of data collection, researchers first reviewed data individually (after they had been de-identified by a graduate research assistant) and then met to discuss initial observations and to reflect on the experience. Once data generation was complete, we conducted another reading of the qualitative data corpus individually and made observations toward emerging themes. Data were then formally coded to identify trends in the participants' perceptions of the affordances and constraints of teaching in rural schools and in their feelings of preparedness to teach in rural schools. We used a thematic analysis (Maxwell, 2005) in our coding process to identify salient themes for further analysis.

After developing an initial set of categorizing codes reflecting participants' perceptions of rurality and their own preparedness, we met to discuss data and further examine themes. Initially categorized by data groupings (pre-questionnaire, Problem-

Posing seminar, and reflections), we used preliminary codes to establish evidentiary warrants for developing assertions (Erickson, 1986). We then tested the validity of these assertions by searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence across all data. For example, an initial code of "insider/outsider" was used to describe concerns, like Jenny's at the start of this article, capturing how teacher candidates might feel about teaching in a rural school if they lack first-hand experience as a rural student. However, applied to the data corpus, we found the data did not support this dichotomy and reframed the development of the assertion. For example, we found that despite some students' feelings as an "outsider," they were quite adept at offering solutions to a rural challenge during the Problem-Posing seminar. Similarly, they were able to recognize in their reflections that they needed a rural placement to feel adequately prepared to teach in a rural school. Rather than "insider/outsider," an assertion capturing the nuance of cultural experiences and the influence they have on one's feelings about rurality became a more fitting frame for thinking of this dissonance. Students who had experience in a rural school in any capacity felt more confident than those who did not. These more refined codes further delineated thematic understandings of the data, as reflected in Table 1. However, those initial codes were maintained as meaning makers that led to the interpretation and application of those refined codes. We then arranged quotes from the participants into tables related to the themes we identified. We used these tables and the themes to further examine the data and consider salient issues in light of the themes we created (Riessman, 2008).

**Table 1**  
*Initial and Refined Codes*

<b>Initial codes / Meaning making</b>	<b>Refined codes</b>	<b>Interpretation of codes</b>
Insider/outsider	Cultural experience	The degree to which participants expressed the belief that they had or lacked first-hand experience, which influenced their perceptions and feelings of preparedness.
Close-knit community Connection to nature	Rural benefits	The ways in which participants identified perceived affordances of working in a rural community.
Lack of resources Low reading ability	Rural challenges	The ways in which participants articulated perceived deficits associated with teaching in a rural community.
Low expectations Lacking motivation Curricular relevance	Student needs	The ways in which participants articulated perceived challenges associated with working with rural students.
Stereotypes	Stereotypes	Participants' understanding of the influence or threat of rural stereotypes.

Table 1

This process of coding, organizing, and reflecting on the data led to our systematic and exhaustive analyses of the data, from which we developed findings described as empirical assertions (Erickson, 1986) in the subsequent section. This inductive approach helped us examine the participants' perceptions and reflect upon how we might improve our program to better prepare future preservice teachers.

## **Findings**

In this section, we describe assertions from our analyses and provide supporting data from the

evidentiary warrants. In keeping with analytic induction, narrative vignettes and direct quotes “make clear the particulars of the patterns of social organization and meaning-perspective that are contained in the assertions” (Erickson, 1986, p. 149). Our assertions suggest generally that teacher candidates initially regard rural communities as idyllic place, rural schools as having limited resources (e.g., technology), and rural students as having many shortfalls (e.g., motivation). However, their training in a dialogic pedagogy gives them a frame for understanding how they, as English teachers,

can address challenges to meet the needs of rural learners.

**Assertion 1: Participants' beliefs about rural communities are grounded in the idyllic rural trope.**

***Grounding The Assertion in Theory***

Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia speaks to a tension or conflict in language and how meanings of that language are shaped by context and contexts. When we applied that lens to the data, we saw a tension in participants' understandings of rurality and how those understandings are shaped by their own experiences and then reinforced by persistent beliefs that characterize rural life as consistently harmonious. Participants described rural communities in ways that were consistent with the idyllic rural trope. For example, Kyle said that the rural students he had worked with "had a lot of experiences with land and nature," which is consistent with Trevor's experiences teaching in a rural school. Many of his students wrote about their experiences "coon hunting" in their journal entries in his ninth grade classes. This was also evident in the case of "Billy Charles" (Barone, 1989), who preferred hunting and trapping to school-based learning. These personal and text examples matched ideals described by participants who lacked first-hand rural experience. As Robert noted: "If I am to assume that rural students have a connection to nature, then there is a chance for some really powerful nature-based creative writing." That experience in nature could even be generalized, as Katina suggested: "Deep down, I think they have a desire to make a deeper connection to the world."

The presumption here is that rural students are inherently *more* connected to nature than, perhaps, non-rural students. Or, that the centripetal forces (Bakhtin, 1981) of language and culture create shared and common

experiences among people. Bakhtin, however, also argued that language and culture are subject to the centrifugal forces that decentralize language, meaning, and, thus, experiences. This process of "centralization and decentralization" (p. 272) results in experiences that are, at once, common and unique. Meaning, that while rural students may in fact have experience with nature, those experiences uniquely shape any given student. This heteroglot nature of language and culture has important implications for teachers. Understanding the nuances of students' home cultures is a key aspect of preparing lessons that will be responsive to students' needs.

***The Idyllic Trope at Work*** The idyllic rural trope is problematic not because it erroneously suggests that all rural communities are tight knit, harmonious places, but because it perpetuates a Pollyanna view of rurality and disarms efforts to address unique rural challenges. Participants in our study consistently identified the rural community as a benefit for teaching in a rural school. Having extensive experience in rural communities, we believe this to be true as well. As Sienna suggested, an "everybody knows everybody" community *can* be a benefit. This can have dividends in the classroom. As Robert noted, "The rural communities I've seen tend to be more group oriented, which could aid to student centered learning." Or, as Katy suggested, "They are typically comfortable discussing with their peers as they are likely to know everyone in the class very well."

The challenge then with this perception is that it may serve as a blinder to rural realities and cause frustrations for novice teachers who encounter friction in those schools or communities. Consistently, participants relied on this thinking about rural communities, as suggested by Dawn who reflected on her



personal experiences and offered, “I lived in that kind of area for a time. I think the community is closer and parents typically have instilled respect for elders in their children.” There was one discrepant case in which Alex reflected on the community as a challenge to teaching in a rural school. He acknowledged that, “Remote areas could get pretty lonely, especially for someone just leaving college life.” We found this to be a balanced expectation for work in rural communities. Also, we acknowledge that some preservice teachers may simply be more interested in living and working in areas that are not remote. They may decide that city life is the context that suits them best, which is okay. We need good teachers who are able to make connections between content and culture *everywhere*. We simply want to ensure that we do our best to prepare them for success *wherever* they choose to teach. Based on the perceptions by the other teacher candidates, we conclude here that meaningful exposure to a disruption of this trope would be useful in the context of an English education methods course, thus prompting the focus of the rural-based Problem-Posing seminar on the community tensions in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

**Assertion 2: Participants’ beliefs about rural students highlight issues often related to perceived deficits.**

When discussing potential challenges to working with any student population, it is easy to focus on what is not present or things that are lacking; this is a natural response to thinking about challenges. This natural inclination is not so problematic or offensive when discussing physical conditions or logistical resources. For example, Robert noted that he “would feel better if we designed lessons around ‘low tech’ or ‘low resource’ classrooms” when asked (on the pre-questionnaire) about what kinds of activities we could do in methods classes to increase comfort

when teaching in a rural school. However, these discussions become fraught with issues and the potential for deficit model thinking to undermine one’s view of a student’s potential when they turn away from resources and begin to focus on the characteristics of a student population.

The issue of a deficit model view can be consistently seen in the participants’ responses to the pre-questionnaire. For example, Kailey moved the discussion in this direction when she noted, “the students might not be as motivated in class” when asked about perceived challenges to working in a rural school. Kailey was not alone in feeling this way. The issue of a lack of motivation was a common perceived challenge amongst the participants. Faith echoed this sentiment as she shared the belief that “most rural students struggle with motivation. Many times, in my experience, school isn’t a priority because they don’t think it matters”. The goal, then, is to help preservice teachers learn to think about perceived challenges to teaching in ways that will not position students as having deficits—or characteristics that somehow define these students as flawed individuals who need their teachers to “fix” them.

During our initial analysis of the pre-questionnaire data, we noted this trend in the participants’ responses. Although we had spent a good deal of time working with issues of deficit model thinking in our methods classes, these issues were still present in participants’ thinking; we believe this is a natural progression. They were learning to confront issues of stereotypes and perceived deficits, but they were, at this point, novice teacher candidates who were just beginning to wrestle with the challenges they might encounter in working with students who were qualitatively different from them. Preservice teachers are, typically, high performing students who bring a unique level of motivation with them to the

classroom. In order to provide a scaffold and help the participants begin to think about how to frame their understanding of these challenges differently, the Rural Problem-Posing seminar included a specific focus on “stereotype threat” (Aronson & Steele, 2005), which is an identified construct explaining under-achievement or failure to reach full potential across multiple populations (e.g., middle school minority students, white male university engineering students and African American students at highly regarded colleges) (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004; Aronson, et al, 1999; Aronson, Steele, Salinas, & Lustina, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele & Aronson, 1998). Additionally, stereotype threat has been documented as a factor inhibiting student performance for those identifying as a “Southerner” (Clark, Eno, & Guadagno, 2011). Only one participant, Dawn, spoke directly to the influence of stereotypes on rural students prior to the Problem-Posing seminar. In her pre-questionnaire during the fall semester, she asked how teachers might aid in helping “break through to kids who constantly hear the rural = dumb stereotype.”

Therefore, we wanted the Problem-Posing seminar to serve a dual focus: to create a dialogue about the deficit thinking teachers need to be aware of in their teaching of rural students, and to address the pervasive negative stereotypes about rurality threatening students’ perceptions of their own ability. Both undermine and put at risk rural students’ achievement. We believe this intervention was an effective means of helping these novice preservice teachers move in the direction of thinking about the challenges they might encounter differently. We argue that this is one of the chief tasks for teacher educators, and we believe a focus on a dialogic, culturally responsive pedagogy can be an effective way to address this challenge.

### **Assertion 3: Enacting a dialogic pedagogy gives preservice teachers a frame for understanding student difference.**

To create an opportunity to discuss these rural issues, we designed and implemented a rural-focused Problem-Posing seminar (see Appendix C). In doing so, we used *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the primary text for confronting issues of rurality in canonical texts, even ones that are revered. We frontloaded the conversation with a short description about stereotype threat:

Everyone has many identities based on gender, race, age, *place*, etc. Stereotype threat is when there is a situation in which students might feel at risk for confirming a negative stereotype about their social group or one of their identities. Research shows that this sort of stereotype threat can negatively affect school achievement.

Amy described a hypothetical secondary English class in a rural high school. She read to the class: “I am worried the negative stereotypes about rural people in the novel pose this sort of threat to my students.” The protocol document ended with several key quotations for the students to consider as they thought about how to teach a novel that might potentially insult students’ lived experiences. For example, Lee describes the novel’s poorest family as having “lived behind the town garbage dump. . . . The cabin’s plank walls were supplemented with sheets of corrugated iron, its roof shingled with tin cans hammered flat.” This excerpt is typical of the quotations used on the Problem-Posing document.

The next step in the Problem-Posing protocol involves having the group ask clarifying questions to help them frame the suggestions they will offer. During this step, the group asked questions about the hypothetical high school students. They wanted to know more information about their socioeconomic status and whether or not these students had

addressed a book about race before. One participant asked if the class was typically talkative when discussing other novels or topics. These clarifying questions served as evidence for a certain disposition of students wanting to understand context *before* brainstorming possible solutions.

In the next phase of the protocol, students spend 20 minutes, responding to the presenter's framing questions. It was evident that participants were directly drawing on their experiences from their previous English education methods courses. For example, one student reflected on a learning activity about civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. She said, "I'm thinking about our class activity on Ferguson." This activity, in Amy's Teaching Adolescent Readers, was designed as a model for bringing contemporary, political, and potentially polarizing events into the English classroom in a productive and supportive way. The student generalizing from this classroom experience illustrates student thinking about how to approach stereotypes in a nonthreatening way. Another example of this thinking was from a different student who added:

Can you get them talking about the negative stereotypes? How is this stereotype true? How is it not true? Can you talk about negative stereotypes about everything – all negative stereotypes – to promote discussion and make sure no one feels singled out? That might increase comfort and debunk stereotypes. Which stereotype might people think about you? Which are true and not true?

While not necessarily related to issues of rurality, another student described an activity she did about identity, involving *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-time Indian* and *Of Mice and Men*. After describing the activity, she suggested that it "could work with *To Kill a Mockingbird*," indicating her belief that stereotypes can be addressed in supportive ways.

Other students suggested similar activities – one called "Breaking the Wall," where students participate in a symbolic act of "tearing down" stereotypes. Another student brainstormed an idea related to an activity about Emmett Till.

We found this discussion to be reflective of the culturally responsive and dialogic pedagogies modeled in our courses. In fact, one student suggested that the teacher might work to alleviate guilt about race relations, "reminding students that they are not personally responsible for historical events." Another student, however, immediately commented, "But aren't the Ewells and the Cunninghams both white?" This was a particularly interesting exchange because it suggests the inherent assumption that rural students lack racial or ethnic diversity. Another student suggested "pairing a text that emphasizes place – a poem or story that is Appalachian – as a bridge to themes already talked about in the book." While their awareness of white privilege, guilt and the need for place-based and culturally responsive, supplemental texts are all in keeping with their training as teacher candidates, and illustrates their thinking about understanding the importance of curricular relevance and a connection to home culture, we realized that we may be framing rurality in a rather limited way based on our own experiences and geographic context; something we plan to attend to as we move forward.

Finally, participants recognized the need for students to make personal connections with the text. They suggested journaling, think-pair-share strategies, and writing place poems, individually or with a peer, before engaging in a full class discussion. One student emphasized the importance of knowing "student backgrounds and where they are from in order to make it relevant." One of the preservice teachers told a quick story about her student describing killing chickens and commented that chicken killing is "so far" out of how she (the

participant) grew up. While many of the participants' perceptions are consistent with deficit model thinking, this one comment disrupted or challenged that notion. Rather, it illustrates that preservice teachers might be coming by these perceptions honestly. Meaning, they might simply not know what they don't know. There's an important implication here: providing preservice teachers with multiple experiences to reflect critically on their own biases (implicit or otherwise) and pervasive stereotypes about rural people and places may serve as an instructional move to reposition future teachers' feelings of preparedness for successful teaching in rural schools. To that end, as Katina noted in her post-questionnaire reflection, "Students may respond differently to literature that would be otherwise overlooked by non-rural students (i.e., racial issues, class issues)." Katina's response demonstrates the potential benefits of helping students think about the importance of teaching from a dialogic, culturally responsive stance.

### **Enacting a Dialogic Pedagogy**

In her post-questionnaire, Faith noted that the Rural Problem-Posing seminar "opened [her] eyes to the way that rural students might respond to stereotypes." Her response indexes the crucial concept that teachers will not be successful in a rural school (or any school context) if they are unable or unwilling to learn about how their students' cultural contexts might influence teaching and learning. Throughout the data corpus, the participants consistently noted the importance of making connections between their students' lives and the content they would be teaching. For example, Jenny shared the belief that "texts need to be relatable" and that "students need to see themselves in the text." This is, no doubt, a result of the focus on enacting a dialogic pedagogy, which was the foundation of the

methods courses. What we find most encouraging about this finding is that it demonstrates that the participants are internalizing the concept that students will reject "teachers and schools that they perceive as hostile, alien, or oppressive to their home-based identities" (Gee, 2008, p. 39). Kyle's statement, "I've learned that you have to get to know the community and the lifestyle of the student to at least know where they come from," is indicative of how this group of preservice teachers is thinking about the connection between culture, place, and content. Kyle voices a significant issue; preservice teachers need opportunities to participate in field placements in rural environments. In fact, six of the eleven participants specifically stated that they believe spending more time in rural placements would help them feel better prepared to teach in a rural school. While this seems like an obvious solution, it's not quite so simple. Just as seat time in a classroom does not guarantee mastery of knowledge, time spent in a rural practicum does not guarantee that preservice teachers will leave that placement better prepared. Those practicum experiences must be carefully planned and structured around a framework that attends to the nuances of culture and place.

### **Discussion**

Our work with these preservice teachers highlights the importance of attending to issues of culture and place in the English classroom. It is simply not enough to encourage teachers to build relationships with students and make the curriculum "relevant." Instead, teacher educators must make concerted efforts to dig deeply into the concepts of culture and place to explore how individual differences influence teaching and learning. As James so adeptly pointed out in his reflection, "Kids are kids." While seemingly simple, this sentiment drives at the very heart of our English education program:

teach the kids in front of you. Though limited by a small sample and unique context, what we have chronicled in this paper are our efforts to take novice teacher candidates and scaffold their development, as they learn to frame challenges they encounter differently and enact a pedagogy responsive to the needs of culture and place. We want to make sure that we are preparing preservice teachers to focus on the centrifugal forces of language and culture (Bakhtin, 1981) that make each kid just a little bit different. Britzman (2003) argued that speaking, “as if there is one monolithic culture of teachers, students or schools, is to take up a discourse that is at once authoritative and impossible” (p. 71). Therefore, it’s important for teacher educators to spend time considering how we can structure our programs to make this focus a practical part of the work we do to prepare teachers for success in rural schools.

### **Recommendations**

With this research study, we set out to better understand teacher candidates’ perceptions of rurality and consider how a teacher preparation program might prepare preservice English teachers for success in rural schools. To that end, we conclude our discussion with two recommendations. The first is to undergird a teacher preparation program with pedagogies that can be applied to or generalized in rural communities. We believe that our focus on culturally responsive, dialogic pedagogy with an emphasis on place has prepared our preservice teachers to be resourceful in the rural classroom. This was most evident during the Problem-Posing seminar where participants were both eager and adept at thinking through solutions for rural challenges. The second recommendation is for teacher preparation programs to provide preservice teachers with meaningful teaching experiences in rural schools. When asked how we could better

prepare participants for rural teaching success on the post-questionnaire reflection, more than half of the participants responded “more rural placements.” We are committed to this recommendation and are now seeking to place our next cohort of teacher candidates in rural student teaching placements. Future research in this area would be in determining the effectiveness of these strategies in preparing teachers for careers in rural schools.

### **Coda**

We are all influenced by our place identities and how and where those identities are shaped – geographically, but also socially and culturally. Regardless of where these preservice teachers go on to teach, we feel that an attention to rural settings is worthwhile. Life in many rural communities is influenced by generational poverty, government neglect, and in some cases, overt and oppressive corporate manipulations. While often “unseen” by the general public, rural challenges are issues that affect many. In our region of Appalachia, mountaintop removal and natural gas fracking are two obvious examples. The point is, even if these teacher candidates never step foot in a rural school, we hope our focus on the inherent worth of rural communities and the need to include rurality in conversations about social justice will have a lasting effect on our students. By putting rural on the proverbial map for these young people, we hope they will teach their future students with a critical consciousness about rurality; that they will quash a “redneck joke” being told in their classroom; that they will bring into question the ways texts (even canonical ones) portray rural people and places; that they will use their training in dialogic, place, and culturally responsive pedagogies to, at the very least, shine a critical light on the issues in rural communities. If they find themselves doing this successfully in a rural school - even better.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Problem-Posing Inquiry**

In an effort to make our seminar meetings a true community of practice, Teacher Candidates will take turns highlighting problems or issues they are encountering in their placements. Consistent with the program's focus on dialogue and a strong connection between theory and practice, our work here will be centered on moving towards creative ways to address the issues we encounter. These *Problem-posing Seminars* will be a chance for us to work together to generate ideas that might offer *practical* suggestions for improving our practice while maintaining a positive focus.

### **Problem-Posing Protocol**

1. Using the template, the presenter will pose his or her problem for discussion and open the dialogue by sharing framing questions and a relevant artifact.\* (5-7 minutes)  
\*Note: If the artifact is something that can't be easily shared in document form (e.g. a conversation with a parent or student), craft a document that can summarize the experience or conversation.
2. The group will ask any necessary clarifying questions and the presenter will respond briefly. (5 minutes)
3. The group uses the framing questions as a structure for helping to identify possible solutions to the problem that has been posed. The presenter takes notes but does not participate in the discussion. (20-25 minutes)
4. The presenter summarizes and comments on what he or she heard during the discussion—focusing on key issues and strategies for moving forward. (3-5 minutes)
5. The presenter will write a 2-3 page reflection that highlights ways the group has contributed to his or her understanding of the issue and possible ways to address the challenges being encountered. The reflection will also note what steps the presenter plans to take in the coming weeks. In subsequent meetings, presenters will share the results of their efforts to implement the suggestions offered by the group.

**Appendix B**  
**English Education Survey**

1. How prepared do you feel (right now) to student teach in a rural school?
2. How prepared do you feel to design and deliver instruction to meet the needs of students in rural schools?
3. What have you learned, so far, that makes you feel prepared to meet the needs of rural learners?
4. What kinds of class activities could we do to make you feel more confident about student teaching in a rural school?
5. What supports, resources, or scaffolds do you think would be most helpful for rural learners in English class?
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. What do you think are the greatest strengths that rural students bring to the English classroom?
9. What kinds of things do you think rural students might struggle with the most in English class?

## **Appendix C**

### **Problem Posing Seminar**

#### **Focus Issue: Stereotype Threat**

Everyone has many identities based on gender, race, age, *place*, etc. Stereotype threat is when there is a situation in which students might feel at risk for confirming a negative stereotype about their social group or one of their identities. Research shows that this sort of stereotype threat can negatively affect school achievement.

I just started teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I am worried the negative stereotypes about rural people in the novel pose this sort of threat to my students. I'm not sure if it's because the topic makes them uncomfortable, but I am having trouble finding ways to get my students to connect with the text. During my attempts to engage the class in discussion, my students are reluctant to address issues of race and class because they are uncomfortable talking about differences. I think it's important to talk about these issues, but I don't want my students to feel defensive or targeted.

The author illustrates different types of rurality with the most educated (Atticus) being the most open-minded – but, even among the rural poor, Lee describes farmers as this sort of noble or respectable poor (Cunninghams) versus a neglectful or despicable poor (Ewells). I just fear that my students have a lot more Cunninghams and Ewells in their lives than Finches.

#### **Context:**

I teach 3 sections of English 9 – two are standard levels and one honors section. My students are white and from a mix of middle-class and lower/middle-class homes. Regardless of SES, the students are similar in that they grew up in this rural community, as have most of their parents and grandparents. It's a very insular community with strong traditions. The students are well-behaved and eager to please.

#### **Framing Questions:**

- How can I support my students as I ask them to step out of their comfort zones?
- How can I get my students, who are mostly white, to discuss issues of race as we read this text?
  - Should I differentiate these discussions for standard and honors students?
- How can I engage my students on the importance of place as we discuss this text?
- Even though TKAM is a beloved text, I personally believe it perpetuates many negative stereotypes about rural people (or Southern rural people).
  - Should I address this in a meaningful way if I have clear, critical literacy objectives – or is it just too risky?

**Artifact 1: Summary of a failed class discussion**

Me:

When we first meet Walter Cunningham, Scout says: "He did have on a clean shirt and neatly mended overalls."

In contrast, when we meet Burris Ewell, Scout says: "He was the filthiest human I had ever seen. His neck was dark grey, the backs of his hands were rusty, and his finger nails were black deep into the quick."

Why does the author make a difference between Walter and Burris?

(no comments)

Me: Okay, what are the boys reactions when the teacher approaches them about their health issues. As a reminder, Walter had hookworms from going barefoot on the farm, and Burris had "cooties."

Student: Well, Walter was embarrassed, and Burris was mad and defensive.

Me: Exactly. So why is the author giving us two different examples of poverty here?

(no comments)

Note: Students just would not engage and seemed uncomfortable so I moved on to the next activity.

**Artifact 2: Relevant quotations about rurality related to stereotype threat**

In Maycomb County, it was easy to tell when someone bathed regularly, as opposed to yearly lavations: Mr. Ewell had a scalded look; as if an overnight soaking had deprived him of protective layers of dirt. . . . Mayella looked as if she tried to keep clean. . . ."

"Every town had families like the Ewells. . . . (they) lived as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of depression. . . . no public health officer could free them from congenital defects, various worms, and the diseases indigenous to filthy surroundings."

"Maycomb's Ewells lived behind the town garbage dump. . . . The cabin's plank walls were supplemented with sheets of corrugated iron, its roof shingled with tin cans hammered flat. . . ."

". . . the Ewells gave the dump a thorough gleaming every day, and the fruits of their industry (those that were not eaten) made the plot of ground around the cabin look like the playhouse of an insane child. . . . a discarded dentist's chair, an ancient icebox. . . . old shoes, worn-out table radios. . . ."

## **Appendix D**

### **Reflection**

1. Thinking specifically about the issues related to rurality and stereotypes in the problem-posing seminar, how did this experience help you think about teaching in a rural environment?
2. In what ways might this experience have helped you generate practical strategies for working with rural students?
3. What do you see as the benefits of teaching in a rural school? Conversely, what do you see as hindrances of teaching in a rural school?
4. Thinking about what you've learned so far in the program related to teaching students with diverse needs, what else could we do to help you feel more prepared or more confident about the prospect of teaching in a rural school?