

Changing the Narrative on Rural Schools: Addressing Damaging Rural School Stereotypes through Teacher Education

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Abstract

In the wake of recent political events, rural people and places experience unfiltered and uncensored criticism. For the approximately 20% of America's children who are growing up in rural places, these stereotyped narratives are damaging and dehumanizing. To ensure the well-being of rural children across the United States, teacher education programs must prepare teacher candidates to view rural schools from a strengths-based perspective. To do this, teacher education programs must consider the importance of critical pedagogy of place and the essential role of strong school-university partnerships. This article provides a historic and current look at rural schools, discusses the impact of rural stereotypes, and charts an initial path for teacher education programs to change the current narrative about rural schools. Perspectives that address rural stereotypes through a critical lens are essential for all educational stakeholders, no matter their locale.

Keywords: Rural education, teacher preparation, school-university partnerships

In the weeks and months following the 2016 presidential election that resulted in Donald Trump assuming the power of the Oval Office, many journalists, scholars, politicians, and political analysts saw red (Howley & Howley, 2018; Victor, 2016). Using the electoral map to gather coordinates, they centered this anger on rural America (Leonard, 2017). Now, in the wake of the 2020 election and the January 6, 2021 attack on the nation's capital, it has become commonplace for rural people and places to experience unfiltered criticism with pejorative phrases to describe rural people and places considered acceptable practice amongst the

mainstream media. This scrutiny is felt across rural places and by the people, including children, who live there. As rural education researchers and advocates, we worry about the approximately 20% of America's children who are growing up in these rural areas and under the gaze of this nationwide view (Showalter et al., 2019). Identity formation begins at a young age, and rural children are continually faced with messages that are both demeaning and dehumanizing (Theobald & Wood, 2010; Ticken & Williams, 2021). We fear the consequences of a generation of rural children's identities being shaped by the negative rhetoric that surrounds rural people and places. Additionally, after more than two years of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, teachers in all settings are leaving the profession in droves (Carver-Thomas, et al., 2021; Singer, 2021). Nowhere is this more of a concern than in rural schools, where teacher recruitment and retention is an historical challenge (Monk, 2007). Concerningly, new teachers entering the field with a deficit mindset regarding rural people are likely to further harmful rural stereotypes. With these pressing issues in mind, we assert that it is imperative for teacher preparation programs to acknowledge and address the damaging rural stereotypes that have become mainstream in American culture and we ask, what strengths-based strategies should be employed by teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers who are ready to meet the needs of rural children and their families?

Rural schools and communities make it their mission to cultivate positive self-images in children (Howley & Redding, 2021), but they cannot combat negative stereotypes alone. It will take a collective effort to positively center rural children's experiences in both rural and non-rural classrooms, an effort teacher educators and their institutions must join. Hearteningly, teacher preparation programs across the United States are responding to recent events by empowering teacher candidates to address hard histories head on, to recognize and call out

prejudice, and to center anti-racist pedagogies at the heart of teaching practices. Importantly, this work must include addressing rural stereotypes through thoughtful and intentional teacher preparation practices that center rural strengths through a critical pedagogy of place (Azano et al., 2021; Gruenewald, 2003) and strong school-university partnerships (AACTE, 2018; NCATE 2010). In the section that immediately follows, we briefly outline the history and current status of rural schools. Next, we describe the evolution of rural education research and the impact that research and mainstream media has in impacting rural stereotypes. Finally, we invite readers to engage in changing the narrative about rural schools, concluding with initial steps of building strong school-university partnerships that offer promise for addressing damaging rural stereotypes through a critical pedagogy of place.

Background

Why Rural Matters indicates that nationwide approximately 9.3 million students attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019). Despite the false narrative of rural places as all white, the report illustrates that if a teacher randomly selected a rural school to begin their employment they would have a 32% chance of teaching in a racially diverse environment, and their new students are less likely to have been transient in the last year. The teacher is also likely to work in a district that receives higher shares of state funding to offset place-specific costs attributed to rural schools. Student poverty and academic achievement will vary significantly depending on the geographic locale of the school (i.e., high student poverty is concentrated in the Southwest as well as parts of the Mid-South, Southeast, and Appalachia), but rural teachers nationwide will see approximately 88% of rural students graduate from high school (Showalter et al., 2019). This walkthrough is illustrative of the data we draw from to understand rural schools across the nation.

Troublingly, the history of rural schools is that they have always been on the margins and outskirts, both geographically and, importantly, in terms of educational policy (Theobald & Campbell, 2014; Tyack, 1974; Ravitch, 2010). Historically, rural schools have been subject to the idea of the “one best system” which is an intentionally urban centric approach to public education that was perfected in the latter 20th century (Tyack, 1974). Leaders of this movement depicted what they saw as the “rural school problem” and suggested it required an urban-centric approach focused on fiscal efficiency, organizational continuity, and standardized curriculum, all of which were often realized through the efforts of school consolidation. Some of the official reasons for closure/consolidation are cost efficiency and the possibility of providing a better education for students elsewhere (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). With consolidation, the “rural school problem” vanished for some districts because rural schools lost their recognition as a unique educational sphere. In 1919, the United States had “more than 270,000 [rural] schools” and by 2010 “less than 100,000” (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019, p. 920). As a result, the problems rural schools faced “became subsumed in a larger discourse of education as an institutional phenomenon, rather than as a community-based, highly contextual one” (Biddle & Azano, 2016, p. 308). School consolidation remains a contentious issue in 21st century rural America.

Unique aspects of rural communities are simply not accounted for in most curricula in teacher education, or for that matter in rural schools due to metro-centric, blanket-style educational reforms. For example, funding in rural schools has never accounted for unique rural considerations (e.g., transportation and broadband connectivity), leaving fewer available resources to implement large scale reforms such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Brenner, 2018; Timar & Carter, 2017). This leads to a conflict of values between rural schools

and their students (Hardré & Hennessey, 2010). The current neoliberal regime that writes educational policy renders students and parents as consumers in a market economy, rather than members of a community (Seelig, 2017). Because rural schools and communities simply contain less people than urban areas, and therefore receive less federal funding, their ability to advocate for themselves is compromised (Franzak et al., 2019). To complicate this further, some states underdeliver even on this promise by providing less funding to rural school districts than they should (Showalter et al., 2019). Ultimately, rural places are often rendered as failed economies rather than struggling communities.

However, there is strength to be found in the environmental resilience of rural schools and communities, yet this component of rural life is often not acknowledged, and, worse, may be sabotaged by metro-centric educational policy. A salient example is the tendency for high school curriculum to prioritize individual social capital and upward mobility but dismisses the value in leveraging social capital to build more systemic community wide viability (Petrin et al., 2014). In this way policymakers dismiss the importance community plays in the rural lifeworld. This metro-centric narrative also unfortunately compels students and individuals from rural places to conceptualize their resilience as being able to survive and persist in their rural environment until they are able to relocate to a more urban environment (McMahon, 2015). The pejorative narrative of “rural brain drain” or the outmigration of youth from rural areas ignores the relational aspects of the rural and urban and suburban -- there are those from non-rural areas that do decide to move and live in them (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Acknowledging the intersections between rural, urban, and suburban, rather than reifying their boundaries, represents a first step in addressing the current narrative surrounding rural places and people. This narrative is closely connected to rural education research and the portrayal of rurality in mainstream media.

Rural Education Research and Media Portrayal

More than 25 years ago, DeYoung reported, "Rural American schools still educate almost 28% of the nation's children, but only educational historians and rural sociologists have paid much attention to issues and dynamics of such places" (1995, p. 168). Indeed, the scarcity of research on rural schools was noted in comprehensive literature reviews throughout the 20th century and first decade of the 21st century (Arnold et al., 2005; Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999; Stapel & DeYoung, 2011). During this time period, non-rural schools were the focus of most research efforts, and imperfect comparisons were frequently made between urban and rural locales. These comparisons failed to identify both challenges and strengths that are unique to rural schools. Often, research was reported as unique to rural schools when in fact the research was merely conducted in a rural school with no mention of considerations that differentiate rural schools from other contexts.

In recent decades, specific attention to rural education research has seen improvement. Beginning in 2002, The Rural School and Community Trust began releasing *Why Rural Matters*, a biennial report that highlights the state of rural education in each of the 50 states and calls attention to challenges and successes in rural schools (Showalter et al., 2019). Additionally, in an effort to seek rural research in specific areas that were particularly missing, the National Rural Education Association (NREA) released the *Rural Research Agenda - 2016-2021* (NREA, 2016). The Rural Research Agenda outlined research priorities focused on building rural research capacity and addressing rural students' educational attainment (NREA, 2016). Most recently, NREA released a new rural research agenda for 2022-2027 that centers spatial and education equity with five other interconnected themes (Hartman et al., 2022; NREA 2022).

Despite these concerted efforts to increase the amount and quality of rural education

research, authentic rural perspectives continue to be missing in mainstream research literature, and portrayals of rural people and places in the national conversation are dominated by deficit-driven, stereotype-laden portrayals (Biddle et al., 2019). Most recently, despite rural education scholars collectively denouncing the deficit-based Appalachian perspectives presented in J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* (see especially *What You're Getting Wrong About Appalachia* for a counter narrative), in 2020, it was made into a movie directed by Ron Howard. Even more recently, *The New York Times* published an education piece titled, "The Tragedy of America's Rural Schools" (Parks, 2021). This article once again continues the harmful narrative that rural schools are failed institutions. The article neglects to recognize the federal and state policy decisions that contribute to rural school challenges, and, most importantly, the article completely ignores the many ways that rural schools support and sustain rural communities. These troubling characterizations continue to dominate portrayals of rural people and places across media outlets (Tieken & Williams, 2021).

One solution to these tensions is the expansive body of peer-reviewed work inside the field of rural studies that aptly highlights educational initiatives that benefit rural communities and the children learning within them (Azano et al., 2021; Azano and Biddle, 2019). These initiatives are at their best when they position schools, communities, and universities to partner together. Rural places draw their strength from community and thrive from learning systems and partnerships that draw from this rather than taking the urban-centric approach of focusing on the individual (Azano, 2015; Biddle & Azano, 2016). Teacher preparation programs have the ability to contribute to this partnership work in synergistic and mutually beneficial ways.

Critical Pedagogy of Place and Teacher Preparation

The preparation of rural school teachers has been largely ignored in educator preparation, and, for rural-focused institutions who did acknowledge the importance of place and its influence on the development of teacher candidates, resources that specifically prepared teacher candidates to teach in rural settings are limited (Mehta, 2013; Theobald, 2015; Tyack, 1972; Tye, 2000). Given this, rural teacher preparation continues to be a critical area of study for those engaged and invested in the vitality and well-being of rural people and places. To address the historic and continuing marginalization of rural people and places, Azano et al. (2021) advocate for a critical pedagogy of place which, “prioritizes learning connections between the local, regional, national, and global contexts, while also considering power and privilege” (p. 48). Founded on the work of Gruenewald (2003), critical pedagogy of place combines the principles of place-based learning, which prioritizes developing an understanding of rural places in order to increase a “sense of place,” with an understanding of a region’s history of oppression and marginalization of land and/or people. Critical pedagogy of place was not developed specifically for rural contexts, however, given the strong attachment to place that characterizes rural people and the history of marginalization of rural places and people, the theory is particularly well suited for application in rural contexts. Often used as a theory for understanding the exploitation of land and resources in rural places (Greenwood, 2013; Huffling et al., 2017), critical pedagogy of place is also well suited to teacher preparation as a way to enable teacher candidates to gain a deeper understanding of rural issues that have shaped a rural community’s past and present and which contribute to persistent rural stereotypes.

School-University Partnerships in Rural Schools

At the heart of preparing teacher candidates to confront rural stereotypes is an emphasis on the importance of sustained and embedded clinical experiences in rural settings (AACTE, 2018; NCATE 2010). Despite the need to develop and sustain strong P-12 school partnerships in all locales, we posit that this is especially important in rural school settings. With the release of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) Blue Ribbon report in 2010 and reaffirmed by the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) in 2018, an upside-down model of teacher preparation has been promoted. This clinically-based model of teacher preparation promotes intensive, sustained, and collaborative field experiences throughout the teacher preparation program and is widely recognized for equity-focused teacher preparation practices that are essential for effectively preparing teacher candidates in all settings (AACTE, 2018; NCATE, 2010).

Traditional power structures that place a university's needs above those of P-12 partners are a concern in the development of all school-university partnerships (Zeichner, 2018). However, this is especially true in rural settings, which have a long history of being marginalized by individuals or entities with more power and/or influence (Azano et al., 2021). Too often, rural schools' experiences with universities have been limited to one-and-done research activities or drive-by clinical experiences for teacher candidates. When teacher candidates begin clinical experiences in rural schools, they often view the rural school or region from one of two narrow perspectives: 1) From a deficit-based, savior-focused perspective or 2) As bucolic places where people exist in perfect harmony with each other and nature (Azano et al., 2021; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Biddle & Azano, 2016). In a quest to develop a deep and holistic understanding of rural settings, both stereotypical viewpoints are damaging (Howley & Redding, 2021). With

this in mind, it is imperative that all stakeholders who are engaged in preparing teacher candidates work to change the damaging stereotypes that rural schools experience. Such narratives are dangerous across locales and have broad reach outside of rural contexts.

Changing the Narrative

For a shift in the rural school narrative to be successful, specific attention to identifying and valuing rural school strengths must occur in conjunction with recognizing and calling out harmful rural school stereotypes. At the heart of this work in teacher preparation should be a commitment to pursuing strong school-university partnerships.

Identifying and Valuing Rural School Strengths

Rural schools, more so than their suburban and urban counterparts, function as hubs that create close connections to support rural communities (Azano et al., 2021; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019; Wille et al., 2019). However, simply labeling rural schools as community hubs underscores the importance of these schools in the life and psyche of the local community. Rural schools also tend to have smaller class sizes that allow for more personalized relationships with students and the community (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Tran et al., 2020). Indeed, Mara Tieken opens her book, *Why Rural Schools Matter* (2014), with such a sentiment saying “I couldn’t have avoided knowing my students if I wanted to” (p. 4). This sentiment also extends towards the narratives of rural school teachers that have abided so long as a figure in the community as to have taught the children of former students (Azano & Biddle, 2019). Rural schools have also been suggested to have less bureaucratic red tape around the particulars of classroom practice, allowing for greater teacher agency and autonomy in the classroom (Tran et al., 2020). This understated aspect of rural teaching also extends to life beyond the classroom. Since rural teachers often have a stronger sense of place in the community

than other areas, their voice and influence reach farther within the school system and rural community at large (Eppley, 2015).

These distinctions are important, as they help to frame rural schools and communities from a strengths-based perspective. In order to reframe deficit perspectives of rurality, our conceptions of rural *and* the ostensible “opposites” of rural (i.e., urban and suburban) must change. To label or conceptualize rurality and the research of rurality as being part of the margins or distinct from the norm ignores how much rural spaces, places and people are a part of the world, not living on some other planet (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Change must start by addressing and dismantling this “other” narrative and the stereotypes associated with it. Simply put, rural education is not a one-size-fits-all proposition and rural places and people are much more diverse than many people realize.

Addressing and Calling Out Harmful Stereotypes

National media outlets received JD Vance’s (2016) work as an explanation for Trump era politics (see e.g., Rothman, 2016; Senior, 2016), while cosmopolitan-focused academia assigned it as required reading in university classrooms (Catte, 2019). Worse, Vance became a spokesperson and his book a primer for rural policy in prominent political circles (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019). Vance managed to influence the professionalization of rural workers in the region, while more broadly influencing policy directed to Appalachia (Catte, 2018). In other words, Vance and authors like him have profited and gained national influence from their narratives at the same time Appalachian people and natural resources continue to be exported from the region (Catte, 2018). This form of influence illustrates the danger of allowing accessible narratives grounded in personal experience but lacking empirical roots to shape policy, and, worse, curriculum and instruction inside rural schools. To counter this, rural researchers,

educators, and policy makers must continue to respond to and challenge the dangerous stereotyped narratives that are propagated by mainstream media outlets.

Acknowledging that damaging stereotypes about rural people, places, and schools are mainstream, we also strongly advise those who are new to rural schools and communities against allowing the counsel of those attempting to generalize the politics, economics, and cultural norms of rural places to inform the structure of partnerships with rural schools and communities. Consider, for example, how the perpetuation of the myth that rural America is “all white” brings irreparable harm to the many children of color growing up in rural places as it serves to erase them from the landscape. Critical pedagogy of place is one theory that can be utilized in rural teacher preparation to address this (Azano et al., 2021; Gruenewald, 2003). When applied to rural school contexts, this pedagogical theory centers rural experiences around an understanding of critical issues and place-based instruction. For teacher preparation programs, critical pedagogy of place should become central to the work of developing and sustaining strong school-university partnerships in rural school settings, leading to strong implications for recruiting and retaining rural school teachers.

Creating and Sustaining Strong School-University Partnerships

The importance of clinically-based teacher preparation is essential in all settings (AACTE, 2018; NCATE, 2010), and supportive clinical structures are at the heart of the development of strong school-university partnerships, especially in rural settings. Recruiting and retaining teachers in rural settings continues to be a challenge for rural schools (Nguyen, 2020), one that is further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Singer, 2021). Teacher candidates need a diversity of clinical experiences in multiple settings (AACTE, 2018). However, for teacher candidates who attend universities in metropolitan or suburban settings, too often

sustained and authentic clinical experiences in rural settings are absent or inadequate. Teacher candidates who attend universities in rural areas work closely with rural school communities, spending considerable time in rural school settings, yet they often grew up in non-rural settings and have very little experience in and understanding of rural contexts. For teacher candidates who did grow up in rural schools, differences in individual experiences may often still lead to differing definitions of rural (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Given these challenges, developing a truly nuanced and critical understanding of rural schools and communities presents challenges for teacher preparation programs in all locales. Building strong school-university partnerships with an emphasis on critical pedagogy of place is at the heart of effectively addressing these challenges. It is through partnerships between schools and universities that prospective teachers are prepared not only to feel empowered to confront damaging rural stereotypes but also to seek opportunities to teach and contribute to rural schools and communities.

Although clinical structures such as Professional Development School partnerships (NAPDS, 2008, 2021) provide research-based models for developing school-university partnerships, in rural settings, too often drive-by or single day experiences are still common. These experiences do nothing to eschew the negative stereotypes that are prevalent in political rhetoric and popular culture portrayals that surround rural people and places. Instead, schools must seek prolonged and embedded experiences in rural settings for their teacher candidates, and these experiences must be founded on strengths-based perspectives. In particular, it is essential that teacher candidates understand and value rural schools and communities and are given multiple opportunities to engage meaningfully with rural school communities. An understanding of their students' culture and community allows for richer experiences in clinical field

placements, yet this understanding must be grounded in understanding both the strengths of a rural region and the inequities that have shaped its history. Adopting a critical pedagogy of place is one important way to aid teacher candidates in understanding the inequities that have shaped a rural region while also focusing on its strengths (Azano et al., 2021). A teacher candidate's decision to teach in a rural setting after graduation may be impacted by these experiences. Even if a teacher candidate does not choose to teach in a rural school, that candidate's awareness of the strengths and challenges of rural schools is an important way to address the negative rural stereotypes that are prevalent across settings.

Finally, creating and sustaining strong school-university partnerships in rural schools must be founded on developing trust and mutual respect between partners. Since universities have traditionally wielded their power inequitably, the university partner must take the lead in developing trust by engaging in open and frequent communication, being actively present in schools, and by showing school partners that their voices are valued and heard. As in all effective collaborative endeavors, each partner brings strengths that may be unique to their prior experiences. These strengths should be recognized and nurtured with all partners focused on a shared goal of positively benefiting student learning. Now, more than ever, with a global pandemic impacting the nature of clinical experiences in all settings, the importance of establishing strong rural school-university partnerships is illuminated.

Final Thoughts

It has become increasingly clear that rural America is pivotal to the United States confronting nationwide uncertainty about key government services and structures and coming to terms with climate change. Teacher education is the place where P-12 practitioners formalize their understanding of the structure and organization of public education, but also the

relationship between school-community viability. Now is the time to teach the next generation of educators that rural schools educate students who live in connected communities that are stewards of the natural resources the nation relies on for food and energy, as well as the spaces we go to for respite and recreation. Rural children deserve opportunities to inform the way the world sees them – to have their voices heard - as opposed to being formed by rhetoric that seeks to diminish their potential within the broader American society. Teachers in rural schools have a powerful opportunity to encourage rural students to imagine a just transition for not only their own communities, but also for the nation at large.

In our research on justice and equity in rural schools, a fundamental argument that emerges is that rural children need to be empowered to change the policy and politics that hollow out their communities, inflame hate speech and actions, and degrade their local environments. It is impossible to imagine this empowerment taking hold in the absence of informed teachers and purposefully designed curriculum. Importantly, we consistently advise colleagues new to rural schools and communities against looking to the counsel of those attempting to generalize the politics, economics, and cultural norms of rural places to inform the structure of partnerships with rural schools and communities.

Too often, teacher candidates do not have the opportunity to learn how rural schools are discrete from metropolitan and suburban schools. Rural places across the United States are remote--beyond that the easy comparisons end. We urge educator preparation programs to design their preparation programs, and especially their clinical experiences, through a lens of critical pedagogy of place that strives to acknowledge the ongoing marginalization of rural people and places while simultaneously recognizing their strengths. It is through sustained and supportive school-university partnerships that teacher preparation programs have an opportunity to change

the stereotyped viewpoints that teacher candidates often enter their preparation programs predisposed to believe. Teacher education programs have an obligation to actively engage in this discussion, both for the well-being of rural children and their school communities and for the nation as a whole.

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