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Research Article

Rural Teacher Preparation in the State of Alabama

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Eva Kane

Rural teacher recruitment and retention is a matter of interest for the state of Alabama as policymakers look to understand teacher shortages in rural schools across the state. How teachers are prepared to teach in rural schools is an essential part of rural teacher recruitment and retention. Preservice teachers need exposure to rural contexts as a part of their teacher preparation programs. This study examined how teacher preparation programs in Alabama are integrating rural-specific components. Among the 25 teacher preparation programs in Alabama, nearly 25% reported integrating three or more rural-specific components into their teacher preparation programs. Some teacher preparation programs also reported creating new initiatives or altering the program based on the needs of schools in their geographic area, but over two-thirds of teacher preparation programs in Alabama did not report the creation or adaptation of programs to fulfill the needs of the area. Those programs that did integrate rural-specific components reported the integration of multiple-subject certification, access for rural residents, recruitment of rural residents, rural field experiences, and rural issue-focused coursework.

The subject of rural teacher recruitment and retention is not a new subject within the realm of rural education; it has become an issue in some capacity for nearly all U.S. states. Rural teacher recruitment and retention is especially important for the state of Alabama. Showalter et al. (2019) identified the state as tied for second place in the top 10 highest priority states in rural education with the state showing urgent, crucial, or critical needs in all five gauge areas, which cover the importance of rural education, student and family diversity, college readiness, educational policy context, and educational outcomes. Only Mississippi showed a more critical need across all five areas. In Alabama, one in three students attends a rural school, and nearly half Alabama's schools are considered rural (Showalter et al., 2019). With so many of Alabama's students attending rural schools, it is important for teachers to be prepared to teach in rural settings.

Rural schools have higher teacher attrition rates compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). Both small and rural school districts have earned the designation of difficult to staff and recognize teacher recruitment and retention as continuing issues (Lowe, 2006). Alabama's reported teacher shortage was shown to be most severe in rural school districts, with school districts in Alabama's rural Black Belt region reporting that 30% to 83% of math and science teachers are teaching without proper credentials (Crain, 2019). To understand and resolve teacher shortages in rural areas, much research has explored

recruitment and retention within schools and school districts, but very little has been done to examine the intentional practices of teacher preparation programs to prepare preservice teachers to teach in rural school districts. In this study we interviewed representatives of 19 higher education institutions across Alabama with teacher preparation programs to determine their ability to recruit and prepare teachers for rural areas.

Rural Problem

Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers to teach in rural schools is a complex matter. Understanding the context of rural schools, as seen in teacher preparation programs, can offer insight when attempting to understand problems surrounding recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools (Barker & Beckner, 1985; Barley & Brigham, 2008). The teacher shortage has been reported as a crisis in many areas, not just in rural schools (Adie & Barton, 2012), but the teacher shortage has become an even bigger issue for rural schools that already had struggled with teacher recruitment and retention (Barley, 2009). Rural schools in Alabama report difficulty filling teaching positions for all grade levels and subjects, with secondary school positions being especially difficult to fill in rural school districts (Crain, 2019). This trend is repeated across the country (García & Weiss, 2019). A great deal of research has explored the challenges of teaching in rural areas (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Blanks et al. 2013), but studies on the intentional efforts of teacher

preparation programs to prepare preservice teachers to teach in rural areas are limited. Researching the practices of teacher preparation programs can lead to the development of better practices in both recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas (Barker & Beckner, 1985; Barley & Brigham, 2008).

As local school systems grapple with the issue of rural teacher recruitment and retention, teacher preparation programs are working to prepare teachers for rural settings (Azano & Stewart, 2015). Teachers' lack of previous experience in rural schools is a factor that affects teachers' choosing to teach and remain in rural communities (Aide & Barton, 2012; Barley, 2009; Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Barley (2009) suggested teacher preparation programs can work to help preservice teachers better understand the nature of rural teaching.

Significance

This study is of particular importance to Alabama, as 64 of its 137 school districts are classified as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Alabama has 25 teacher preparation programs approved through the Alabama State Department of Education (2018). Given the preponderance of rural districts in the state, preparing teachers to teach in rural schools should be a priority for both teacher preparation programs and rural school districts in Alabama. Understanding how teacher preparation programs prepare teachers to teach in rural settings can offer insight when attempting to understand issues surrounding rural teacher recruitment and retention (Barley, 2009). As there is little research concerning how teachers are prepared for rural placements in Alabama, this study provides foundational work to better understand the intentional practices of teacher preparation programs in preparing preservice teachers for rural classrooms.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the intentional practices employed by teacher preparation programs in Alabama to prepare preservice teachers for rural settings. The research question was: How are rural education components, such as multiple-subject certification, access for rural residents, recruitment in rural areas, preservice placement in rural schools, and rural issue-focused courses, integrated into teacher preparation programs?

The 25 teacher preparation programs in Alabama are identified in Figure 1 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>).

Figure 2 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>) illustrates the rural and urban counties in Alabama. Comparing the two maps, it is apparent that the majority of teacher preparation programs are in or near an urban county. The geographic locations of these teacher preparation programs may affect the programs' priorities in their preparation of future teachers.

Research has shown that teacher preparation is critical for new teachers to choose to remain in the profession during the start of their career (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Ingersoll et al. (2014) found that practice teaching, observation of classroom teaching, and feedback on a preservice teacher's own teaching were more important factors of predicting attrition than degree type or method of certification (alternative or traditional). Furthermore, multiple studies have reported that preservice teachers feel more prepared to teach in rural settings after having been exposed to rural teaching (Aide & Barton, 2012; Azano & Stewart, 2016; Hudson & Hudson, 2008; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Young et al., 2018).

Background and Justification

Researchers have recognized teacher recruitment and retention as a complex issue faced by many rural schools across the nation (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Lowe, 2006). Rural teacher shortages have been reported for many years, but recently, in part due to the work of education researchers and local journalists, more attention has been given to teacher shortages and the effects they can have on both state and local school systems (García & Wiess, 2019). Alabama policymakers have begun to look for ways to address the teacher shortage, felt most acutely by the state's rural schools and school districts (Crain, 2019). State policies have mostly focused on retention of the current teaching force without much consideration for the teacher preparation programs tasked with equipping future Alabama teachers.

High-poverty areas report having the most acute teacher shortages (García & Weiss, 2019), and while rural areas are not always considered high-poverty, many rural areas do fall into the category of impoverished as they may lack a strong local economy (Monk, 2007). Because the teaching shortage is most often felt by areas also facing complications due to poverty, the lack of teachers

creates a barrier to the overall goal of providing quality education to all children (García & Weiss, 2019). In Alabama, rural schools report the greatest challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, and when compared with rural students nationwide, rural Alabama students have lower test scores (Crain, 2019; Lindahl, 2011; Showalter et al, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study was a composite theory derived from Lefebvre's (1970/2003) concept of abstract space and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. Lefebvre (1970/2003), a French social scientist, wrote that space is a social construct, and that society assigns value to spaces based upon their perceived worth to society. Urban spaces are viewed as dominant or central, and to Lefebvre (1970/2003), modern life gravitates towards these dominant spaces. Rural spaces exist in the periphery and are seen as having less value because they are not central and are absent from urban life. This notion of rural spaces having less value than urban spaces is seen in educational research, where rural is framed in deficit thinking or by an absence of characteristics found in urban areas (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Theobald & Howley, 1997).

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that people are more likely to do something if they feel they will be successful in their undertakings. Ajzen (1991) found that attitudes and beliefs can be used as predictors to determine if an individual will perform a certain task. A person can choose to perform or not perform certain behaviors. However, if a person believes their undertaking will be successful, the person is more likely to engage in that activity or behavior. Ajzen (1991) defined this phenomenon as perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control combines with attitude and subjective norms to create intentions, and the person acts upon these intentions acted if they believe the action will result in success. In Yost's (2006) study, planned behavior was evident as teachers displayed greater confidence in rural teaching positions after being assigned to rural field experiences during preservice education.

Using this composite theoretical foundation, it would follow that if preservice teachers were adequately prepared to teach in areas that might be viewed as deficit space, like rural schools, they would be more likely to accept a teaching position in

a perceived deficit space. Teachers may also come to view the spaces not by their shortcomings but by their assets. Therefore, to understand the current issues surrounding rural teacher recruitment and retention in Alabama, it is important to know what teacher preparation programs are doing to prepare teachers to teach in rural settings.

Methods

Data Collection

Print materials from all 25 teacher preparation programs in the state of Alabama were analyzed for this study. The collection of publicly available print materials for all programs began with an initial search of the program's website, but also included any linked pages, social media sites, applications, recruitment information, and any other information linked to the teacher preparation program's website. All 25 teacher preparation programs in Alabama were contacted and asked to participate in an interview, with 19 teacher preparation programs agreeing, one program declining, and five not responding. Of the programs that were interviewed, four programs were in rural-designated counties, and 15 were in urban-designated counties. All interview participants were either the chair of a teacher preparation program or the chair's designee.

This study was a multicase qualitative study that used inductive content analysis to analyze all qualitative data. The 19 semi-structured interviews of teacher preparation program leaders served as the primary source of research data. All interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed for the researchers to incorporate questions tied to the research question while also allowing for changes due to each participant's responses. The researcher wrote memos after each interview to aid in the coding process. The interview protocol can be found in the appendix (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>).

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams or Zoom to allow the researcher to record each interview for subsequent transcription. After each interview, the recording was transcribed by the researcher and sent to the interview participant for a member check to confirm validity. Member checks allowed the interview participant to confirm that the transcription was an accurate representation of their words, and while changes were not encouraged, three participants did wish to add information to further

clarify their statements or offer corrections to misstated information. To maintain confidentiality, teacher preparation programs were assigned either an “R” or a “U” to represent if the program was located in a county with a rural or urban designation. The researcher also assigned each program a number for identification purposes during the data collection process. Therefore, in this article each program is referred to by its alphanumeric code.

Data Analysis

Following the conclusion of all interviews and the completion of member checks, the interview data were coded and reviewed for themes. To assist in qualitative data coding and analysis process, all data were entered into QDA Miner Lite. In keeping with inductive content analysis practices, open coding was used, and transcripts were read and reread to identify codes and group similar codes until no new codes emerged. Five categories were identified from a review of the literature, and no new categories were found during the coding process. The five categories and associated codes are listed in the tables (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>). The frequency of each code is also listed to show how often each code appeared in the data. Table 1 includes codes found in the analysis of website data (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>), and Table 2 includes codes found in the analysis of interview data (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>).

Results

Seven of the 25 teacher preparation programs in Alabama include three or more of the five identified rural-specific component categories, but only one of these seven programs includes all five components. Ten programs mentioned at least two components, while the remaining eight programs mentioned either one or none of the rural-specific components on their website or during their interview. Among the six remaining teacher preparation programs that were interviewed, three mentioned at least one rural-specific component on their website.

Among the five categories, access for rural residents was the most commonly reported, with 68% of teacher preparation programs offering some form of course access for rural or remote students. Rural issue-focused courses and recruitment in rural areas were the least common, each mentioned by 20% of

the programs. Just under half of the programs provided evidence of offering rural field placements or multi-subject certification. More information about the category frequency can be found in Table 3 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>).

Multiple-Subject Certification

Multiple-subject certification had eight codes in the website data, 12 codes in the interview data. The most common mention of multiple-subject certification came in the form of dual certification, or earning two teaching certificates in the time it would take to complete one. In the case of U1, all students in the elementary program graduate with endorsements in elementary education and in early childhood education. U1 offers two additional dual certification options, with one in special education and another in physical education and health. Other programs, like U9, allow students to add a collaborative/special education endorsement while also working toward either an elementary education degree or a secondary education degree. U12 also has a dual certification component in which elementary education students are required to take coursework for a second endorsement, but students do not have to complete the requirements for that endorsement.

Dual certification programs in which students earn two certifications were the most common types of multi-subject certification reported, with 10 teacher preparation programs offering at least one type of dual certification. Elementary education and collaborative certification and elementary education and early childhood certification were the most common dual certification options. Two programs reported that students have the option of earning up to four certifications at once. Table 4 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>) shows the most common codes identified for multiple-subject certification, as well as sample responses.

Access for Rural Residents

Among the Alabama teacher preparation programs, access for rural residents was the most often reported rural education component, with more than half the programs mentioning nontraditional classroom formats both on their websites and the interviews. Sixteen teacher preparation programs reported offering courses online, in the evenings, or on satellite campuses to allow rural residents to work

toward teacher preparation without leaving their communities. Table 5 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>) illustrates the ways in which teacher preparation programs are offering access to rural residents.

Recruitment in Rural Areas

Barley and Brigham (2008) noted that teachers recruited from rural areas are more likely to return to the rural area. Recruitment in rural areas was mentioned by five of the 25 teacher preparation programs in Alabama. Of the five programs that did report recruiting in rural areas, three programs operated in an area with an urban designation, with the remaining two programs located in rural areas. The most common methods for recruitment were recruiting from local high schools, hosting career fairs, and providing scholarships for those wishing to teach in rural areas. Table 6 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>) includes sample responses for recruitment in rural areas.

Rural Field Placements

Field experiences are viewed as the foundation of teacher preparation programs, and rural field experiences have shown to provide authentic, meaningful rural experiences to preservice teachers (Hixon & So, 2009, Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Eleven teacher preparation programs reported integration of rural field experiences. For example, the R1 participant explained,

Consequently, we try to give them diverse placements and that expose them to students of varying backgrounds. I think that is the major piece of how we cover rural education in the College of Education.

Due to the location of teacher preparation programs, however, not all preservice teachers are able to have rural field placements, and programs in rural areas are able to offer more rural field experiences to preservice teachers. Some programs did point to diversity of placements, but students are required to have at least two experiences in urban, suburban, or rural placements, so a rural placement cannot be guaranteed. Table 7 (online only <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/ruraleducator/vol45/iss3/>) shows sample responses for rural field experiences and placements.

Rural Issue-Focused Courses

Five teacher preparation programs in Alabama reported having a rural issue-focused coursework. Each code dealing with rural issue-focused courses was a unique code, not shared by any other case in the study. With five unique codes covering rural issues, multi-grade planning, additional training for teacher candidates, faculty training on rural issues, and an emphasis on culturally responsive teaching, this code seems to be the most diverse and is the most difficult to see an emerging theme. U1 offered additional training to preservice teachers before graduation due to the perceived need for this training for teachers who may work in a rural setting, but this category is the one on which teacher preparation programs have placed the least emphasis.

Multiple Subject Certification

Azano and Stewart (2015) suggested that multiple-subject certification in hard-to-staff areas could help fill the need for teachers in rural or hard-to-staff areas. However, for some programs this strategy would mean more coursework and longer practicums, thus making the process longer, more expensive, and less appealing to preservice teachers. For Alabama, 12 teacher preparation programs reported that students can become certified in two or more areas in the same time it would take to be certified in one. Special education is a hard-to-staff area for Alabama, but six teacher preparation programs reported students being able to receive dual or multiple certifications; special education was available or required for students to earn along with another certification. One program leader stated:

Our elementary program was so large, and I think a lot of what we noticed was our students were kind of scared of the special ed piece and scared of going into those classrooms. So we just decided that all of our teachers should be prepared to work with all students in the elementary school. So we merge those two programs, where they leave with dual certification, and they have various school experiences over three or four semesters in diverse school placement.

With nearly half of Alabama's teacher preparation programs reporting one or more options for multiple certifications, and two of these programs offering coursework that would allow preservice teachers to become certified in up to four areas, it does appear

that this approach is a way in which preparation programs are working to fill teaching vacancies.

Access for Rural Residents

Alabama has 67 counties, and 55 are considered rural (Alabama Department of Public Health & Alabama Rural Health Association, 2007). Only six of the 25 teacher preparation programs in the state are in a rural county, leaving the remaining 19 clustered in Alabama's urban areas. Among the rural-specific components, access for rural residents was the most reported component, with 11 teacher preparation programs offering some form of alternative access via online coursework, community college partnerships, access to provisional certification, and satellite campuses.

The use of content experts as teachers has increased over the years, thus creating a need for alternative certification routes (Kuenzi, 2018). These teachers may live and work in rural areas that do not have immediate access to teacher preparation programs, so online or alternative instructional settings have become an important part of filling the need for teachers in the state. One program responded:

We do, we participate in distance learning. Our programs are the majority of courses are online, and with a provisional certificate those courses are an online program so we can serve the whole state of Alabama.

Online access remains a problem for people who live in rural areas without internet connectivity. Rural internet access is an area that has seen growth, but still not all rural areas have high-speed internet access (Gemin et al., 2018). Community college partnerships can be an alternative to help aspiring teachers who do not want or are unable to complete coursework online, allowing students to begin to work toward the requirements for teacher certification while enrolled in their local community college. This pathway allows students to begin their work as a preservice teacher while still living in their own community. Four teacher preparation programs reported developing partnerships with community colleges to help students have an easier transition to the teacher preparation program after community college. One program reported offering evening classes for students in alternative certification courses, and another reported the use of satellite campuses to allow students access to courses.

Recruitment in Rural Areas

Preservice teachers who already have lived in a rural area are more likely to return to a rural area after completing their teacher preparation program (Barley, 2009). This "grow your own" approach has become a pathway to help fill teaching vacancies in rural areas. Brownell et al. (2018) suggested that beginning to recruit rural teachers from among rural high schoolers via career fairs, future teacher clubs, and precollegiate programs bears promise, as many rural residents may choose to return to their local area to teach or choose to teach in a rural area like where they attended high school. Two teacher preparation programs reported developing future teacher programs, and two additional programs reported recruiting potential teachers from precollegiate career fairs and precollegiate campus visits.

In addition to recruiting from among high school students, recruiting teachers from among other residents living and working in rural areas can help fill the needs for teachers (Monk, 2007). By creating pathways to teacher certification for those who choose to begin teaching later in life, teacher preparation programs can help grow rural teachers. Three Alabama teacher preparation programs reported offering scholarships for those wishing to pursue teacher education. These scholarships were not always tied to students who wanted to teach in rural areas, but they are a way to offset the costs of changing careers or returning to school later in life, which might be a barrier to entering a teacher preparation program.

Rural Field Placements

Rural field placements are considered a means to provide preservice teachers with the most authentic scope of rural context (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). The Alabama State Board of Education (2009) requires that preservice teachers conduct a minimum of 150 field hours in diverse school settings. These field placements are usually conducted throughout a student's time in the teacher education program, and the student completes these hours while also taking coursework. Because the student must be able to complete assigned field experiences and be close enough to return to campus for classes, schools that host field experience placements must be an easy drive from the campus. This limitation means that students enrolled in programs in urban areas have few opportunities for field experience in rural

schools. One program located in an urban area did mention that rural placements were not a priority when placing students in field experiences:

We feel pretty comfortable that our students are getting a really good diversity of placements...

We define primarily at this point, based more on ethnicity and socioeconomic status not urban versus rural. If we were really looking at the needs of our students or even our community partners, rural has not come up as a high need for us.

As Azano and Stewart (2016) reported, novice teachers that do not have rural experiences as preservice teachers may not feel fully prepared to teach in rural settings, which may cause them only to seek employment in areas similar to those in which they did have field experiences.

Research has shown that field experiences in rural settings can affect a preservice teacher's perceptions of rural education (Young et al., 2018). Six teacher preparation programs mentioned diversity of placements for accreditation purposes, which stipulate that a student should have a placement in two settings—urban, suburban, or rural. In contrast, making sure students have exposure to rural contexts through field experiences is an intentional process for some programs. Four programs required preservice teachers to complete a specified number of field experience hours in a rural setting, and one program required 50% of the required 150 hours to take place in rural schools.

Rural Issue-Focused Courses

Prior research has suggested that some teacher preparation programs do not include coursework related to rural contexts because so many students already have familiarity with rural life (Barley, 2009). However, Moffa and McHenry-Sorber's (2018) study showed that even though a program may report having an emphasis on rural education, students from rural areas did not report seeing a rural emphasis in the program, meaning that explicit rural connections should be made for students to connect coursework with rural contexts. Of the five programs in Alabama that reported rural issue-focused courses, these courses ranged from additional training for teacher candidates due to an assumed financial hardship among rural districts, rural issues in coursework, teaching strategies covering multi-grade planning, faculty training on rural issues, and emphasis on culturally responsive teaching. Unlike

the other rural-specific components, no clear themes emerged, and this component seemed to be of the least importance to teacher preparation programs.

Findings

Alabama has an immediate need for teachers (Crain, 2019), but how teachers are prepared is important. Teacher's preparation experience has been shown to be an indicator of a teacher's choice to remain in the classroom (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Diversity of field experiences and exposure to rural contexts can allow even first-year teachers to feel confident in their abilities to teach and be successful in rural schools (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Yost, 2006). Most of Alabama's teacher preparation programs report some inclusion of rural education in their curricula, but of the 25 programs in Alabama, only seven reported integrating three or more rural-specific components into their program. Six of these seven programs were in urban-designated counties, and the seventh was in a rural county.

This study was based upon a composite theory framework, combining the ideas of Lefebvre's (1970/2003) theory of the construct space and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. Space is assigned value based upon the ideals and social constructs of a society, where urban spaces are dominant spaces and are assigned greater value than rural spaces that exist on the periphery and are seen as less valuable (Lefebvre, 1970/2003). Ajzen's theory of planned behavior states that people are more likely to do something if they feel their endeavors will be successful (Ajzen, 1991). Using this composite theory, it would follow that preservice teachers who have not been exposed to rural contexts may view rural areas as less valuable. However, preservice teachers who are exposed to rural contexts in preservice education and believe they can be successful in the position might be more likely to accept a teaching position in a rural area.

Research has shown that rural areas are often viewed as problem areas, and even universities have designated rural areas as less valuable (Biddle & Azaon, 2016; Theobald & Howley, 1997), yet a greater percentage of urban-based teacher preparation programs than rural-based teacher preparation programs reported having rural-specific components. Most of the participating programs were from urban Alabama areas. Of those programs reporting three or more rural components, 32% of urban-based programs had three or more components compared

with only 17% of rural-based programs. Focusing on the programs that reported the integration of two or more rural-specific components, nearly 75% of urban-based programs reported rural-specific components, while 50% of rural-based programs reported the integration of two or more components. Urban-based Alabama teacher preparation programs reported more integration of rural-specific components than their rural-based counterparts.

Barley (2009) found that some teacher preparation program faculty did not see the need to create courses that focused on rural contexts because students of the program were already familiar with rural life, which may explain why more urban-based teacher preparation programs than rural-based programs reported rural context content. Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) found, however, that although some teacher preparation programs reported including rural contexts in coursework, students from rural areas did not report seeing rural context in their coursework. Therefore, just because these programs report including rural contexts, their students would not necessarily report rural emphasis in the program.

Of the rural-specific components that were most often integrated, access for rural residents was by far the most common, with 68% of all teacher preparation programs reporting integration of online coursework, community college partnerships, evening courses, or satellite campuses. Online access was the most common form of access for rural residents, with 11 teacher preparation programs reporting some form of online coursework. Rural states like Alabama still struggle with internet access for rural areas (Gemin et al., 2018), however. If a program reported that rural residents have access to online courses, rural residents of the state might not be able to access these courses.

Rural field placements were the third highest reported rural-specific component among teacher preparation programs in Alabama. Diversity of placement is mandated by both the State of Alabama Board of Education and accrediting agencies (Alabama State Board of Education, 2009). All teacher preparation programs in the state are expected to follow the guidelines for diversity of placement. Six teacher preparation programs used diversity of placement to show rural field experiences are a part of the overall teacher preparation program. Diversity of placement requirements do not necessarily mean that students based in urban teacher preparation programs are guaranteed a rural field experience. Mitchell et al. (2009) noted that lack of access to

rural placements can inhibit preservice teachers from developing an understanding of rural schools. Rural-based teacher preparation programs reported that preservice teachers receive exposure to rural contexts since rural schools are those closest and most available for field experiences (Barley, 2009).

Discussion

The implications of this study are important for Alabama's rural teacher shortage (Crain, 2019). Just over one-fourth of Alabama's teacher preparation programs reported integrating three or more rural-specific components into their program, yet nearly half the school districts in Alabama are classified as rural, and one in three Alabama students attends a rural school (Showalter et al., 2019). With so many rural schools and rural students, a greater percentage of teacher preparation programs should be placing some emphasis on rural education.

If we do not understand the intentional practices of teacher preparation programs to prepare teachers to teach in rural areas, we cannot fully understand the current teacher shortage in Alabama. This study examined how teacher preparation programs in Alabama prepare teachers to teach in rural settings and found that a greater percentage of urban-based teacher preparation programs than rural-based teacher preparation programs reported the integration of rural-specific components. When it came to tracking the need for teachers in the geographic area, however, 67% of rural-based programs reported tracking the need for teachers in the area, compared with 32% of urban-based programs.

If the rural teacher shortage in Alabama is to be solved, one place we must look is how teachers are being prepared for rural settings. While some teacher preparation programs in Alabama report including rural contexts within their program, most do not, despite the high percentage of rural schools and rural students in Alabama. This issue needs to be addressed as policymakers work to understand the problems associated with rural teacher recruitment and retention.

As policymakers in Alabama attempt to create solutions for the teacher shortage, more must be done to understand the intentional practices of teacher preparation programs. Teacher preparation plays a part in teacher recruitment and retention. The contexts to which preservice teachers are exposed during their teacher preparation program can influence where they go on to teach (Yost, 2006).

Likewise, how teachers are prepared is linked with teacher attrition. Teachers who receive more exposure to pedagogy and who obtain more credentials are more likely to remain in the teaching profession (García & Weiss, 2019; Latham et al., 2015; Zhang & Zeller, 2016).

Recommendations and Future Research Directions

This study was intended to understand how teacher preparation programs in Alabama prepare teachers to teach in rural settings. This study can inform future studies on the integration of rural-specific components in teacher preparation programs in Alabama. The findings of this study could be compared to later studies to determine if more teacher preparation programs have integrated rural-specific components as the need for rural teachers has become greater.

The differences in approaches to rural teacher preparation between rural- and urban-based programs could also be investigated further. This study found that more urban-based programs than rural-based programs included rural contexts, and more research could be done to understand this phenomenon. More

research also could be conducted to understand the effectiveness of the five rural-specific components presented in this study for preparing preservice teachers for rural settings.

Conclusion

Most of Alabama's teacher shortage is being reported in rural areas (Crain, 2019), and one in three of Alabama's children attend a rural school. How teachers are prepared matters. If Alabama is to solve the issue of rural recruitment and retention, teacher preparation is a large part of the solution. Rural schools need qualified teachers, yet little is known about how teachers are prepared for rural settings (Azano & Stewart, 2016). If we are to understand how teachers are being prepared for rural settings, we must first identify those intentional practices that teacher preparation programs are using to integrate rural contexts into preservice education. This study has attempted to identify those practices and the types of teacher preparation programs using them, but as this study is a preliminary exploration of the practices used by Alabama's teacher preparation programs, it should serve as a foundation to better understand how to prepare teachers for rural settings.

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