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Research Article

“There’s an Unspoken Set of Rules”: Rural Education in the Northern Plains

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Teacher preparation programs that operate in rural areas need to consider the lived experiences of rural students when making instructional decisions. However, exploration of rural schools and educators is seriously limited. This study aims to gain an understanding of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in rural areas of the Northern Plains and the unique experiences they bring to, and need from, preservice teacher training programs. Seventeen interviews were conducted with rural participants who were enrolled in teacher preparation programs. Based on the data collected, we do not recommend changing the traditional canon of teacher preparation but do recommend contextualizing concepts to be relevant to future rural educators. The voices of these future educators are shared here, as are recommended next steps and needs for future research.

“We do have shared experiences. You know? Like the branding on the ranch, that’s a big event. People come from all over to help with branding or shearing or various chores. In some ways, rural means we still have this attitude that people must have had 100 years ago about helping each other, reaching out to each other more.” ~ Dalton, special education major

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs in rural areas of the Northern Plains and the unique experiences they bring to, and need from, preservice teacher training programs. This study was undertaken in the hope that the insights and knowledge gained would help inform curricular and pedagogical decision making of educators and institutions who prepare students to be public school educators outside urban centers. Rural schools face myriad obstacles, which include low teacher pay, low levels of teacher retention, high staff workloads, outdated infrastructure, and limited monetary and technological resources.

This study also aims to strengthen our understanding and expand the existing research base relating to rural schools in the Northern Great Plains of the United States (US). According to the U.S. Global Change Research Program (2021), Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming are included in the Northern Plains and this study is focused on the nature of rurality and rural education in this region. This section of the Upper Midwest of the US is considered a research desert (Thier et al., 2021), meaning very little educational research exists on rural communities and teacher candidates in the rural Northern Plains.

The Heart of the Community

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 97% of the land mass in the US is rural, and one in five Americans lives in a rural area (Ratcliffe et al., 2016), including 13 million children under 18 years old. Approximately one-half of school districts, one-third of schools, and one-fifth of students in the US are located in rural areas (Kena et al., 2016; White House Rural Council, 2011). Understandably, in these areas “the rural school is often identified as the traditional heart of its community; often it operates as the focus point of external economic and social influences, as well as political requirements for change and renewal” (White & Kline, 2012, p. 39). As such, rural schools and educational experiences are key to understanding a significant portion of our society.

However, exploration of rural schools and educators is seriously limited. Burton et al. (2013) stated that the “lack of research about U.S. rural teachers in general education journals is significant” (p. 8), and Manly et al. (2020) asserted that “a resurgence of educational research on rural students is needed” (p. 765). Furthermore, Thier et al. (2021) described large sections of the country as “rural education research deserts” (p. 9). Based on our review of the literature, the majority of rural education research in the US is focused on the Appalachian region, with a dearth of research focused on the Northern Plains of the Midwest.

In addition to gaps in the research literature addressing rural schools and communities, much of the existing research literature portrays “rurality as ‘the problem’ to overcome rather than as the setting to understand” (Burton et al., 2013, p. 8). These

portrayals of rurality as the actual obstacle, as opposed to the setting in which these obstacles occur, can serve to alienate less populated areas and the way people live within them. This representation also presents an inaccurate and misleading characterization of teachers and students who live, work, and learn in rural communities. In fact, teachers in rural areas often identify “the rural community as a benefit for teaching in rural schools” (Azano & Stewart, 2016, p. 115).

This is not to suggest that small towns and schools are devoid of struggle. Rural schools and communities, like their urban counterparts, have their own unique strengths and challenges. Prior studies have shown that rural teachers “expressed feelings of professional isolation” (Azano et al., 2014, p. 97), while many districts have difficulty recruiting and keeping qualified teachers (Lockette, 2010; Lowrey, 2019), have limited access to transportation (Lowrey, 2019) and resources like educational technology and materials (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Azano et al., 2014), and struggle to access “the same educational programs or job-training opportunities found in more urban districts” (Lowrey, 2019, p. 1). Additionally, issues related to poverty and mental health are endemic to many mountainous, farming, ranching, and Native communities (Lowrey, 2019; Ringgenberg et al., 2018).

Integrating the Rural Experience into Teacher Preparation

For teacher preparation programs that operate in rural areas and prepare students from rural areas to teach in rural areas, it seems urgent that these programs consider the lived experiences of rural students and teachers when making curricular and pedagogical choices. White and Kline (2012) described the “knowledge and skills required to work in a particular rural place appeared vital for new graduates’ preparation” (p. 39). The universality of teacher preparation curriculum should also be considered when working with preservice teachers who will teach in rural areas. Specifically, Eppley (2009) discussed the localization of curriculum and the need to reconcile the mandated curriculum with students’ lived experiences. Further, strengthening and affirming rural identities is important as Larson and Dearthmont (2002) found “positive identification with the rural culture is significant in resilient outcomes” (p. 830). Further, Wynhoff Olsen et al. (2022) explored preservice and practicing teachers’ sense of belonging in rural schools and communities

and the tensions inherent to their personal and professional identities. In addition, with a culturally relevant curricular model, it is important to recognize that “rural communities have unique needs and structures that require specialized preparation and retention methods” (Gallo & Beckman, 2016, pp. 3–4). Faculty who work in teacher preparation programs that primarily serve rural areas should have a clear understanding of their students’ social and practical schema and the needs and expectations of the schools in which they will serve in. Further, they should use this knowledge to personalize, scaffold, and supplement the curriculum where and how it is needed most for their students.

Methodology

The two authors conducted 17 interviews with participants who were enrolled in teacher preparation programs in the Northern Plains and who self-identified as rural. The research took place before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and interviews were conducted via Zoom. The procedures developed by the researchers were designed to deepen understandings of the lived experiences in the region, and through thick description (Geertz, 1973), in the appropriate and operating context (Ponterotto, 2006).

Participants

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2013) were used to select participants for this study. Participants were preservice teacher education candidates who self-identified as rural. All the participants were known to the researchers and self-selected to determine eligibility. The participants were enrolled in a teacher preparation program located in the Northern Plains and were at various stages of completion. Their majors included elementary education (ELED), secondary education, and special education (SPED).

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 55 years old and were raised in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wyoming, and Oregon. Of the 17 participants, 15 were female and 15 identified as White—though not the same 15; the two non-White participants were female. Pseudonyms are used to reference participants in individual responses. Though all participants were all from rural areas, the context of their lived experiences varied. Approximately half the participants were from ranching or farming families and communities, and half identified as townspeople. All participants grew up in, and most continued to live in, areas known for

natural resource development, including farming, ranching, or mining. The participants who self-identified as townspeople grew up in families who were involved in public service, education, and private business.

Positionality of Researchers

Both researchers in this study are White university faculty members with terminal degrees in their respective fields. Neither researcher was raised in a rural environment; one was raised in suburban Georgia, and the other was raised in urban and suburban southern California. Both researchers currently work at institutions located in rural areas, which serve schools and educators in rural communities. While neither researcher had previously identified as “rural,” they both have been living and working in rural areas for 6–8 years. This very dichotomy—between the rural communities in which they live and the rural educators with whom they work, and their professional training and experiences prior to their current roles—led them to pursue this research topic. Despite the years that have passed since each relocated to their respective rural community, a separation will always exist between them, and the subjects involved in their research who have grown up in rural communities. The researchers also acknowledge a power differential between their roles as researchers and faculty members and the preservice teacher participants involved in this study.

Data Collection

As Brinkmann (2018) noted, the interview has been naturalized as a qualitative research approach, and in particular the semi-structured interview offers the greatest potential for both the interviewer and interviewee to accomplish their goals. With this guidance, 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2020 and March 2021. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, then transcribed. Instructions were provided to participants on how to access the Zoom interview, and care was taken to ensure confidentiality during the interview.

The typical interview lasted 30–45 minutes and consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to learn more about participants’ lived experiences growing up in rural areas and attending rural P–12 schools. Three specific questions each related to their perceptions of the rural P–12 school they attended, experiences related to rural areas in general, and their professional teaching plans. The initial questions and

all follow-up questions were designed to elicit material descriptions of participants’ experiences and to understand how they have experienced the concept of rural, closely aligned with Brinkmann’s (2018) description of a constructivist conception of interviews. Based on participant responses, the researchers asked follow-up or clarifying questions yielding valuable data, similar to depth probing as described by Glesne (2011). For example, athletics in rural schools was not a topic of the initial questions, but the topic came up repeatedly in interviews, resulting in a stable, consistent theme throughout data collection and analysis. Researchers also took observational notes (Stokes, 2013) during the interviews to record initial thoughts on participant responses. These notes were used to contextualize participant responses and as a start to coding transcripts. The researchers did not predetermine the number of interviews. Rather, they sought a saturation point (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011) where adding more data would not change or alter the existing data or new questions outside the original questions would be needed to gain more data. That saturation point was reached after 17 interviews over seven months.

Data Analysis

Individually, transcripts were read and coded using open coding (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015), and tentative codes were developed. The frequency of occurrence within the transcript corpus was initially tracked but was not a determining factor in reducing or combining codes. Once the initial coding was completed, the researchers worked collaboratively to find similarities and connections (Hendrickson, 2012) and moved into the focused coding phase “to determine how resilient the codes are in the bigger picture that emerges from the analysis” (Mertens, 2015, p. 440). This phase included sharing initial coding documents, discussing the rationale and supporting evidence for codes, and combining and reducing the number of themes.

Validity measures included four distinct, purposeful actions. First, to lessen the influence of researcher perceptions, interviews were transcribed verbatim (Maxwell, 2013) so data reflected exactly what was said by each participant. Second, to ensure the transcripts reflected participants’ thoughts and ideas clearly and in context, participants were asked to participate in member checks (Mertens, 2015) in which they reviewed a transcript of their interview and were asked to add, delete, or clarify content.

Only member-checked transcripts were included in the transcript corpus. Third, since the researchers and participants had established teacher-student relationships, power and hierarchy (Glesne, 2011) were addressed by ensuring participants knew their participation in the interview was optional, and established relationships would not be impacted by their participation or any answer given during the interview. Fourth, the researchers used member reflections (Tracy, 2010) through which four participants were provided initial drafts of the results and discussion sections to confirm they reflected their lived experiences.

Results

The themes that were identified from these conversations were clustered around participants' perceptions of the central role of schooling in their families and communities and, in turn, the different ways in which life in their rural communities affected their schools. Participants consistently described their school experiences as uniquely rural and were quick to contrast these experiences to those found in more urban or suburban schools.

School Families

When asked about their own schooling experiences many participants mentioned the specific size of their school or graduating class and focused on the personal connections they had with teachers and fellow students. Many reported that they saw their school as a "big family," with many of the same strengths and struggles typical of many families—caring deeply for each other but also highly involved in each other's business. To illustrate this point, Devan, a music education major, said, "Personally, I loved my high school experience. I perceived it as kind of like a big family. I knew all of my teachers really personally, and they're my friends now and they're my biggest mentors." Drew, a 22-year-old ELED major, mentioned a similar dynamic, but highlighted the negative side of that level of closeness when they said of their community members, "they can really tend to be nosy, because they are used to knowing all about what's going on, inadvertently sometimes—word of mouth and heard it through the grapevine happens a lot in a rural community." Darby, a SPED major, explained how people in their hometown "know everything about you somehow," and Charlie, a 42-year-old ELED major, concurred, saying, "if your parents ever got in

trouble or your siblings ever got in trouble, that stuff—everybody knew about it."

Home Families

In addition to school "families," participants also talked about the roles of their actual families when describing their rural schooling experiences. A common theme was the importance of both the family itself and the family's standing in the broader community. When in school, they reported, teachers' perceptions of their parents, grandparents, and siblings played a role in how they were treated and perceived in both school and larger community settings. People in the school and broader community knew their family name, to whom they were related, and what they did for a living. Often multiple generations of their family attended and graduated from the same schools, and they frequently had the same teachers. Family members' reputations and levels of prestige then influenced how students were treated. For example, Charlie pointed to how families were viewed based on what they did for work, or if parents in the family "had a career more than a job," because "people who would bounce from job to job" where not well regarded or seen as prestigious by the community.

Also prevalent in the discussions was the idea that while schooling was important to most families, and families were important to the school, it was a commonly shared understanding that students' responsibilities to their families overrode their responsibilities to their school. Beck, a White female undergraduate, addressed this topic directly when they said, "family time was more important than homework time." Mason, a SPED/ELED double major, echoed this by saying:

The teachers understand that you may not have school because one family's branding and everybody is related, so they're all gonna go to it. Or if it's calving season in the middle of March and April, you may not have a lot of kids showing up. You may only have kids showing up that are running on 2, 3 hours of sleep and they are third graders, because they're all helping mom and dad calf.

This illustrates the important role that family responsibilities play in the lives of students and other community members, and how schools are expected to understand these responsibilities and respect the obligations that come along with them.

Social Center of Rural Communities

Many participants focused on the central role their school has in their community. For example, Mason reflected this idea when they said, “your school is the center of a little community ‘cause that’s where you gather, and you’re not just isolated to your own family.” The importance of these schools within the larger community was often described as having little or nothing to do with academic instruction occurring within the classrooms themselves, but rather on the significance of the school establishment as the social center of the community. This most often manifested through participation in school-sponsored athletics, but also in extracurricular activities like plays, musical performances, and dances. These activities consistently received high levels of community support, with both parents and non-parent community members attending regularly. Devan commented on “the amount of community support at sporting events and music events,” noting:

It’s the same people coming to every single event because all the kids are in everything, compared to a more urban school where a lot of kids pick one thing to be their thing. But, in a rural school, everyone does everything so the community is always there to support.

Mason reported a similar dynamic in their town and described a neighbor who faithfully attended school sporting events:

Even after all of his nieces and nephews left school, he shows up to every basketball game. Even some of the ones that are like a 30-minute drive, he will even show up to those. And he goes to basketball games, volleyball games, every football game.

Reese, a 29-year-old ELED major, described their town’s passion about school sports teams:

It was kind of the joke that there’s like 470 people in [town]—is the population roughly and the joke was there’s not a single soul in [town]. And I don’t really know if there was. They closed down for the first game. Gas stations closed down, card-controlled pumps were open, the grocery store closed, they closed the town down for the tournament and that kind of happens. Yesterday, they let school out early so the fans could travel to the game.

Participants also discussed the impact of such a large focus on extracurriculars on the student experience. Overall, they reported high levels of student participation, especially in athletics. Darby

said, however, that students who did not participate in school sports were not considered cool, or a real part of the town.

Participants shared opinions about the pros and cons of high levels of student involvement. On the positive side, students did not have to limit themselves to one activity—they had more opportunities for participation. Devan focused on the positive when they said, “I appreciated going to a rural school because I didn’t have to pick one thing that I loved—I could do music and I could do sports and that was a normal thing.” They also appreciated their rural schooling experiences “because kids can try as many things as they want to and not feel like they have to commit to anything.” Another participant noted that a student athlete who might spend most of their time on the bench with few opportunities to play at a big school might play a significant role on the varsity team at a rural school. In these ways, high levels of involvement in extracurricular activities were seen in a positive light for these participants.

Conversely, some participants complained about being stretched to complete not only all of the academic requirements, but to also play football, run track, and play an instrument. They reported feeling like they had to participate in all extracurricular activities because there were not many students to fill the spots on the various teams. Brooks, an art education major, was of this mindset and said, “The students are really stretched to do all the academic stuff, but also have to be in band and on the football team and run track—you have to do everything because there’s just not many kids.” This perceived negative aspect of the expectations of high levels of student involvement in extracurricular activities is a counternarrative to the rosy view presented by others.

Another concern that participants noted about the large focus on athletics and other extracurriculars had to do with the perceived allocation of resources, and the valuing of athletics over academics. Brooks shares this perception, saying that if the school had extra money “they probably wouldn’t use it to update their classrooms or hire a new teacher. They’d use it to buy, like, new football uniforms because sports are so important. I think their priorities are just different.” Saylor, a 47-year-old ELED major, and Reese also both focused on the perception that athletics are valued over academics. Saylor said that in their “experience, a lot of it is sports, a lot of ranching, a lot of sports, very limited focus on education and academics. Almost narrow minded to some extent, like a narrow focus.” Reese agreed that

academics should be more of a focus in their rural school, saying, “the focus on sports is great but, at the end of the day, sports is not a career. I mean, a few—I in whatever it is. Education is really the career—the only thing that takes you further.” In addition to their concerns about the toll high levels of involvement in sports and other extracurricular activities can take on students, participants also discussed impacts on faculty. These concerns are explored further below.

Teachers and Resources Stretched Thin

Participants characterized their P-12 teachers as doing double or triple duty—teaching a variety of subjects, including topics outside their content or grade areas; coaching; and having administrative responsibilities. Reese illustrated this situation in their own family, describing how their mother, who was also a teacher, worked in her school:

Right now, she does have another teacher, so she teaches fourth through eighth and the other teacher teaches K through third, but when I went to school there, my mom was the only teacher and she taught K through 8 and there were like 21 students.

Brooks remembered that they would “have an English teacher who is also teaching this other subject over here because they don’t have anyone else to teach it,” adding that it was “not right, because they aren’t trained to teach that subject, so you’re kind of failing your students in that way.” These statements highlight the various roles that teachers in rural schools are expected to take on in addition to their traditional academic responsibilities, and the perceived drawbacks this scenario creates for both teachers and students.

Participants also described old books, old classroom equipment, and old or missing technology. Special programs for gifted students and students with disabilities were also limited, as were course offerings like AP and foreign language classes. Additionally, their small communities did not have the population or infrastructure to support specialized magnet schools or training programs. One participant commented on the lack of public transportation that limited student mobility, unless they have the means to drive themselves to their desired locations.

All these factors can take a toll on teachers and students alike. Some participants spoke of increased teacher stress and expressed the belief that sometimes teachers did less because they do not want to personally take on more. Parker, a 28-year-old ELED major, articulated this perception when they said:

I think that sometimes it’s just also what the teachers want because they’re not wanting to take on more. And, I get that their job is very stressful, and then I think too sometimes it’s just gets to be an excuse, like we don’t have resources for this or we can’t do it, so it almost becomes a way of getting out of something when there could be a way and it might be a little more difficult, but it’s just easier to not do it.

Roles as Future Teachers

The majority of participants ($n = 14$) reported that they wanted to return to or stay in a rural community to teach once after completing their teacher education programs. While many participants identified negatives about their own rural schooling experiences, they saw these drawbacks as being outweighed by the benefits that teaching in a rural community would offer them personally and professionally. When asked about their future plans, Hayden, a SPED major, said, “as long as it’s thriving, there’s enough special ed. students that are coming through and they can keep me, I will stay here as long as I can.” Hayden is not alone in this hope. Many of the preservice teachers identified personal connections and shared values as some of the leading reasons they hope to build a teaching career at a rural school. Blake, a 19-year-old SPED/ELED double major, said, “I loved growing up rural and I think there’s just something about the connections made in a smaller school with kids, knowing more people and stuff like that.”

The do-it-all requirements for teachers, while acknowledged, were not always seen as a negative. Multiple participants specifically identified it as a positive when anticipating their own teaching careers. Devan saw it as a career benefit, saying they “might be a music teacher but I assume that I will be doing lots of coaching of some sort or theater and drama.” For Devan, teaching multiple subjects and multiple grades, would be an opportunity because they:

Love middle schoolers and I love high schoolers, so if I could get a job teaching—like at my school, my teacher taught fifth through twelfth grade music and so she got to do it all which some people might think sounds like a nightmare, but I don’t know, that’s always what I saw myself doing.

For students like Devan who viewed taking on multiple leadership roles within the school as a favorable aspect of their job, rural schools offer the ideal conditions in which to build a career.

Participants also expressed the belief that while access to resources and opportunities might be more restricted in rural schools, the level of individualization that the small settings make possible outweighs lack of access to technology and a wide variety of course offerings. Charlie relayed this idea when talking about their own family's schooling experiences, saying "I'm "really thankful that my kids are going to a rural school because I don't feel like they fall through the cracks. They get so much more individual attention, like their needs are met more." Similarly, Charlie saw the positive benefits of teaching in a small school, remarking:

If you could diagnose a learning disability when you have more interactions with the student and if you have 30 kids in the classroom, you don't get that one-on-one. So, I do think there's definitely benefits for having the smaller, rural schools.

Charlie viewed the rural school setting as an opportunity to be student-centered: "I wouldn't have a choice to not have it be student-centered because I have one fourth grader, one second grader, one third grader." The classroom Charlie described was in a rural area of the Northern Plains at a small school that served multiple grade levels in the same classroom. It was not uncommon for participants to report having attended, worked at, or completed practicum hours in such a setting.

Isolation and Diversity

Given what we know from the existing literature on rural schools, it was not surprising that several participants expressed concerns about personal and professional isolation and concerns about being underinformed about the world outside their small communities. Mason commented, "I do feel like I'm not educated on stuff around me. I really do. Like I feel very isolated sometimes because like ... not necessarily ignorant, but yet, I am kind of ignorant to what goes on." It is interesting that Mason connected isolation with ignorance, although those two states of being are not necessarily causally connected. Mason was not alone, however, in making this connection. Other participants also talked about how similar most of the people they knew were to each other, and how this lack of diversity could limit their ability to conceptualize people and ideas that were different from their own. Charlie said "pretty much everybody who went to my school was White, middle class, Christian. We all fall in the same, like ... we didn't have hardly any diversity whatsoever." Similarly,

Brooks believed that if someone were to deviate from the "conservative worldview" that was prevalent in their community, they would be "the odd man out," and they "might even be ostracized for having liberal ideas." Brooks noted that "in larger places, there is of course more diversity of thought and in population," but that is not the case in their rural community.

Multiple participants directly linked a lack of racial and ideologic diversity with rurality and physical isolation from larger population centers. Charlie reflected on the homogeneity of thought in their community and looked forward to opportunities to expose their students to new and different ideas:

I'm going to have such a good opportunity to expose the kids to different ideas and thinking than maybe they would otherwise, and I see that a lot in my classroom now where some of the stuff they say or the concepts, we talk about them and they're getting that from home, but it's just that they've never had a chance to make a different decision or to have a different opinion about it or to look at it from a different point of view.

Charlie was expressing the desire to expose students to different viewpoints and to encourage diversity of thought without the need for students to leave the school or larger community. Charlie also expressed a tension being between racially resembling the student population and the desire to add diversity to homogenous student populations.

Two of the 17 participants took these concepts further and directly addressed racism in connection with isolation and resistance to change. Quinn, a secondary education major, said their hometown was not as welcoming to different ideas, and different people of color, and different races, and just ... I think change. Change is a hard thing, I think, for rural communities. Something that's different. Especially in a town that is so rural that it's not exposed to the outside world into the larger ideas out there and the differences and humans out there, you know, it can be very slow to change and very resistant to change.

Drew also addressed the themes of social isolation, ignorance, lack of exposure to different people and ideas, and racism when he said,

Well, we've never been around people who didn't hold the exact same ideals as us, and I'd say the biggest thing that I've talked about with lots of my friends, and I feel like it's appropriate to say in this situation, none of us are racists, but I think we did not have a single African American in my high school at all, let alone my

graduating class and when I went to [college] my freshman year, there was a lot of African Americans and a lot of Asian people and a lot of Hispanic people, and I had no problem with that. It physically made me feel a little weird and out of place, and it made me feel bad because I didn't know any better, and so I had never had the chance to experience that kind of thing, and so I guess that's the thing that people don't let us do very often is—we get labeled as you know, Midwesterners are backwater, and Midwesterners are racist, and if you're from a rural community, you're automatically racist and Republican, and that's not the case. A lot of the time, we literally just don't know any better.

Quinn directly addressed their town's history of racism and what they called a "small mindedness" when they said, "the town that I grew up in has a real strong history with the KKK actually, and so I think a lot of places do in [location], and I'm sure about the country as well dealing with Black, brown, and people of color." This same participant grappled with their desire to someday work in a larger, more diverse environment without having "this White savior complex going on." Quinn stated:

I would really like to see myself working in a larger district that's more diverse, you know, in time, but schools that are more diverse don't need another White woman coming in and teaching them. They need a diverse team; they need a diverse teaching population that closely resembles their population makeup.

This reflection on student diversity and the role of White teachers was unique to Quinn. While other participants did discuss race and identity, no other participants broached the topic of teacher and student diversity in this quite this way.

It is interesting to note that for participants lived in areas with a high concentration of federal Indian reservations and tribal lands, the topic of reservations and Native American students came up rarely. Brooks said that "the reservation is a rural area, but that's pretty unique." While all the reservations the participants referenced were in rural areas, participants distinguished reservation schools from rural schools. Our sample included no Native American participants, so participants' views were from an outside perspective, and participants had few experiences on reservations.

Discussion

To directly address ongoing teacher shortages in rural areas and provide students with a quality education, preservice teachers must leave their teacher preparation programs well prepared to step into their roles as teachers in their rural communities. It is important "to develop pipelines of candidates who are committed specifically to those communities," which can come easily since "many young teachers have a strong preference to teach close to home" (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 61). Many participants share the sentiments of teachers in Berry and Gravelle's (2013) study that the "rural community fostered family-like relationships with others in their school and in-depth relationships with parents and students" (p. 1). Many participants wished to return to this environment to establish their personal and professional lives.

Impacts on Teacher Education

The experiences of students and teachers in rural areas differ from those in urban and suburban areas, and teacher education programs that educate future teachers in rural areas should thoughtfully consider the implications of these differences when designing their licensure and continuing education programs. However, the realities of teaching and learning in small rural schools are not frequently reflected in mainstream teacher preparation curricula. Devan, reflecting on their own teacher preparation classes, said they did not "necessarily think in general textbooks and stuff are usually gauged to rural areas. We kind of have modify it because a lot of people don't have that experience and don't know that it's a little different." When asked about their experiences in their teacher education programs, participants grappled not only with the relevance of the education they received, but also with the education they will impart to their future students. These questions related especially to college preparatory classes, career and technical education courses, population fluctuations, political polarization, and limited exposure to different people and ideas.

Participants expressed a need to teach their future students that there are multiple paths to success after high school, and that they can be successful in college or equally successful in other career paths, like farming, ranching, or working in the oil fields. Reese pushed back against the notion that all their students should be on the path to college when they said, "if you want to be a rancher and

that's all you want to do, then you don't really need the college education." Beck spoke directly about the perceived relevance of even a high school education: "[we have] a high dropout rate, you know, 'cause a lot of jobs there don't need education anyway."

Data on high school and college completion rates of rural students support these perceptions. While students in rural schools are more likely than their urban counterparts to complete high school (Jordan et al., 2012; Lavalley, 2018), they are "significantly less likely to hold a college degree than students in metropolitan areas" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 14), with approximately 51% of rural students not pursuing any postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2017). But even with high rates of high school graduation, the educational experiences that lead to a diploma can vary from those in more populated areas. Lavalley (2018) noted that "the average rural school offers half as many advanced mathematics courses as those in urban areas, and nearly half of rural students attend a school that offers only one to three advanced mathematics courses" (p. 10). This lack of courses has implications for the educational opportunities available for students both while in high school and after they enter postsecondary education or employment. Additionally, teacher preparation programs in urban and suburban contexts may not consider the impact of their programs on future professionals teaching in rural contexts.

Expand Rural

Teacher education programs that serve rural communities need to be more inclusive of the "rural" in which they train teachers to work. Many rural areas in the US include Native American reservations and one-room schools. When reflecting on their level of preparation, Brooks said they "are not well prepared to teach in places like the reservations where things are way different than they are at [local] High School." While many teacher preparation programs can only provide limited opportunities for their preservice teachers to experience rural education (Mitchell et al., 2019), programs operating in and educating students from rural areas can integrate the rural experience into both coursework and fieldwork. Rural teacher education programs can help to fill this need, but only if they take intentional steps to do so.

Realism Over Idealism

Faculty who teach and mentor in teacher preparation programs need to have honest

conversations about the realities of teaching in rural schools, even if these realities go largely unacknowledged by the course textbooks and research literature. Darby discussed the disconnect between the best practices presented in their classes, which often focus on themes related to inclusion and self-determination, with the realities of what education looks like for students with IEPs in rural schools. They said they have yet to see evidence of these values in their rural schools and have yet to hear even a conversation about inclusivity as it relates to students with disabilities. Mason described special education teachers who work in small country schools that "have to drive an hour or two hours just to teach a kid. One student, that is all you are teaching," and then driving more to teach another one or two students. Mason also said, "it's up to the paras [paraeducators] down there to be the teachers."

Teacher education programs can minimize the extent to which their students experience the disconnect between expectation and reality by exposing their students to as many authentic classroom experiences as possible, such as practicums or observation hours. As Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) noted, "rural practicums provide pre-service teachers with authentic experiences in rural schools with the goal of overcoming preconceptions of rural work and life by providing firsthand negotiation of rural school and community issues" (p. 28). Opportunities for preservice teachers to spend time in the types of schools and communities in which they plan to work while still enrolled in their teacher preparation programs allows them the opportunities to learn from authentic experiences while still receiving faculty support in navigating them. These activities can be a valuable part of the teacher preparation process and should not be minimized, even in fast-track or endorsement preparation programs.

Workload and Job Duty Variation

Teachers in rural schools are often asked to teach multiple subjects, some of which they might not be trained for, because their schools do not have enough qualified teachers to teach all the subjects their students require. The teacher shortage that began in many states around 2015 was exacerbated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as teacher retirements, resignations, and leaves of absence increased (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Human and academic resources were already stretched thin in many of the rural schools that participants attended

and plan to return to work in, and they are being stretched more than ever as “recent teacher shortages in small, rural districts are especially severe and compounded by the challenges of the pandemic” (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021, p. 7). When reflecting on their experiences in their teacher education program and the realities of teaching in rural schools, Parker recalled that in their hometown school “a lot of teachers do double duty or triple duty.” Charlie said,

I don’t know how you can prepare people for those extracurricular type things, but you have to be a little more well-rounded I think to teach at a rural school because you’ll be asked to do a lot of things. They’ll be like, “You’re really good at your job, here’s more work for you to do.”

Charlie’s comment mirrors the “one-person team” or “lone wolf” syndrome that Azano et al. (2014) described in their examination of teacher experiences in rural schools. In these districts teachers might find that they are the only specialist in the district or one of only a few faculty members who have the licensure to teach certain subjects or groups of students in the county.

As rural schools are often identified as the social center of their communities, the extra duties required of teachers may also require time beyond contracted school hours, including coaching and directing fine arts programs. These extra duties take on outsized importance in communities like Reese’s where the town would shut down during high school sporting events. These expectations can add to existing pressures on novice teachers, as they might be expected not only to grow as professional teachers, but also to help maintain a community identity through athletics and other extracurriculars. We do not see a curricular solution to this scenario, but rather suggest that teacher education faculty be mindful of this dynamic during advising and mentoring so that preservice teachers can have opportunities to be “introspective and articulate what they expect and value in their future teaching jobs” (Wynhoff Olsen et al., 2022, p. 214). Such reflection can provide opportunities for preservice teachers to understand the scope and expectations of teaching positions in different places as they enter the field and to ask pertinent questions during job interviews.

Role of Technology

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of technology in rural schools looked different than it did in many urban and suburban schools. Participants

described attending or completing practicum hours in schools that used high levels of online learning, primarily because the schools did not have faculty to support all the course offerings that students required or desired, including an increase in virtual learning for core subjects, different language classes, and honors classes. Many high schools also offered dual credit courses, many of which were online, giving students the opportunity to take a course for both high school and college credit.

Unfortunately, however, high-speed internet is “in short supply for rural schools and students” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 24), and access to this infrastructure can be an obstacle to schools and communities with fewer resources. In communities with a lack of reliable internet access, teachers and students are limited to the educational experiences and materials that can be easily obtained. Many rural areas in the Northern Plains are dealing with exactly this issue. According to a 2017 Microsoft report, “more than 68% of the 23.4 million Americans across the country who lack access to a reliable broadband connection live in rural areas” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 24). A recent analysis showed that in 33 of 65 counties in South Dakota, no more than 28% of households had access to high-speed internet (King et al., 2021). Likewise, a report by the Federal Communications Commission (2015) indicated that approximately 37% of residents in states with low population density, including Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, lacked access to any quality internet connection. In many rural areas, “getting any connectivity at all can be problematic” (Lavalley, 2018, p. 24).

Students on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in western South Dakota, one of the largest reservations in the country, must move from onsite schooling to a virtual online high school when they reach ninth grade or transfer to a private or Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs school to access grades 9–12 and complete high school (Lowrey, 2019). Native students in the area who do not have access to internet at home do not have access to high school, which further exacerbates the educational inequities that already exist on the 2.8-million-acre reservation that an estimated 40,000 Oglala Lakota Sioux call home in southwestern South Dakota, where over 80% of residents are unemployed, and 61% of youth under the age of 18 live below the poverty line (Red Cloud Indian School, n.d.).

Access to broadband and technology is also an important part of postsecondary planning for many students. For example, the state of Wyoming has one

public four-year university, the University of Wyoming (UW), which is in the southern part of the state near the Colorado border. For students taking lower division courses with the plan of transferring to a four-year institution, for those who require a plan of study not offered at UW, or for those who live far away from the campus, access to online college classes can be an essential component of being able to meet their career aspirations.

Importance of Connections

It is important that preservice teachers who hope to teach in rural schools take the time to understand the needs and values of the community in which they aspire to teach. Mason recounted a moment from their own schooling experience when they saw a clear mismatch between student realities and teacher expectations:

I was awake at one o'clock in the morning, I drove 20 minutes out to go check my cows, and now I'm back, I didn't have time to do my homework last night because I was worried about getting three hours of sleep so I could make the drive back and forth to school. I had a teacher who was like, 'That's no excuse. You get detention.' And yeah, because I'm running in two hours of sleep. Because I've been checking cows and calving.

Not only should P-12 teachers understand the students who are in their classrooms, but professors who teach future teachers should understand the schools in which their students are going to be teachers. The connections that can exist between rural school faculty, university faculty, and preservice teachers present unique opportunities for mutually beneficial growth, learning, and understanding. These collaborations can in turn produce teachers who are fully prepared to meet their students' needs, which can ultimately result in richer educational experiences for students.

Continuing Education

An additional consideration for teacher education programs is the need to continue relationships with students after they graduate with an undergraduate degree and initial teacher licensure, both for continuing education and for professional development. A great need exists for continuing education and professional development opportunities that rural educators can both attend and find meaningful. Teachers in rural areas are less likely to have a master's degree than teachers from

urban and suburban areas, as "the likelihood of teacher postgraduate education decreases as a community's isolation increases" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 15). Likewise, high-quality professional development can be difficult for many rural educators to access, with physical distance from professional development providers being a significant barrier (Lavalley, 2018). Beyond the difficulties presented by physical distance and other geographical challenges, professional development and continuing education programming developed for use in urban and suburban settings is often not seen as relevant to the needs of rural schools (Johnson & Howley, 2015; Lavalley, 2018). These barriers are especially unfortunate given that improved professional development opportunities for rural teachers may help narrow the reading achievement gaps found in many rural schools (Graham & Teague, 2011).

Institutions of higher education can play a role in both continuing education and professional development by serving as mentors for early-career teachers, providing professional development within rural communities, and offering classes and workshops through virtual platforms. Teacher educators can even provide monthly, quarterly, or summer conferences and meetings for in-person professional learning activities. Institutions of higher education can also play a role in lobbying for higher teacher pay and alleviating some of the "brain drain" through which these states are losing young talented teachers to other states.

Conclusion

This study examined the school experiences of preservice teachers from rural areas and their future career aspirations. Gallo and Beckman (2016) noted, with a deeper understanding of the characteristics and qualities of rural communities, teachers will be better able to successfully teach and meet the local needs of the communities, moving us closer to the goal of ensuring quality education for all. (p. 4)

While providing preservice teachers with learning experiences in rural schools is often less convenient for universities charged with supervising them in their placements, due to the geographic locations of the rural schools in relation to the more populated areas in which universities are most likely to be located, these placements are worthwhile if they afford preservice teachers opportunities to learn about the unique aspects of education in rural schools (Mitchell et al., 2019). When universities do not

place preservice teachers in rural schools, they may be creating a “process that unintentionally curtails the number of educators who may have an interest and potential aptitude to become an educator in a rural school” (Mitchell, 2019, p 12).

Rural schools and communities face a unique set of challenges, but the shared sense of responsibility found in many rural schools (Berry et al., 2011) is a strength to draw from when finding practical, sustainable solutions. Based on our data, we do not recommend changing the traditional canon of teacher preparation but rather recommend contextualizing foundational concepts in a way that is relevant to the particular lived experiences for future rural educators, and the future rural schools in which they will teach. Faculty in rural teacher education programs can do this by inviting preservice teachers in their courses to share their personal experiences in the local schools and by challenging them to make connections between what is being taught in their classes and what they are experiencing out in the schools.

Faculty in rural teacher education programs need also to be mindful of the bias and experiences that they bring into their teacher preparation courses. Like the authors of this article, many university faculty did not attend the rural K–12 schools in which many of their students will teach, and this separation should be acknowledged and examined.

Reframing and reorganizing field experiences in rural teacher preparation programs could help preservice teachers gain a better understanding of rural education. Typically, practicums involve only individual student experiences with the occasional visit from a university faculty member. Contextualizing these experiences, discussing them with peer preservice teachers, and relating their experiences to coursework can give future teachers a broader understanding of rural teaching than isolating these experiences from peers, coursework, and faculty support. Specifically, field experiences focus heavily on mentor teachers’ pedagogy and classroom management, and while important, much can be gained from the preservice teacher getting a more holistic view of teaching in rural schools and

communities. Teacher preparation programs also can serve their local schools by providing trainings to mentor teachers on the scope of expectations and the vital role they play in the transition from preservice teacher to professional teacher.

Making preservice teachers aware of the challenges of teaching in rural schools is not to suggest rural schools need fixing, at least in terms of what an early-career professional teacher can initiate. However, it would be beneficial to preservice teachers if they—and their institutions—viewed their teacher preparation as an education rather than technical training. In this way, by framing the profession as an integral part of rural communities and society at large, they may develop the skills and intellect needed to make changes that can positively affect the communities in which they live and work. The larger responsibility lies with higher education faculty and administrators to not only help preservice teachers contextualize the role of education and schooling in their community and country, but to model critical thinking and understanding of the politics of schooling in the US. Teacher preparation programs should view themselves as educational institutions rather than training facilities. The goals of the programs should include graduating licensed professional teachers, but the mission of the programs should extend to include graduating professionals who can make changes when necessary.

To continue to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of practicing teachers in the Northern Plains region, future research should engage Native American teachers, those who work on reservations and those who work in rural non-reservation schools, provided that researchers develop culturally appropriate research design, build and maintain trust with the local tribal communities, and consider ways in which these communities have been exploited by past experiences. The experiences of faculty who work in teacher education programs in the area should also be considered an area needing future exploration, so that current and future curricular and pedagogical decision making can be better understood.

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