High-Quality Teaching: Providing for Rural Teachers' Professional Development

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Rural school districts face unique challenges in cultivating a teaching force that possesses subject-matter expertise, a willingness to undertake difficult professional work at the local level, and attentiveness to rural practices and cultures. At the same time, many rural schools harbor significant strengths that districts might draw upon to foster high-quality teaching. This policy brief examines this dynamic and suggests the need for professional development practices that are responsive to rural circumstances.

A major goal of current education policy is to improve the level of student achievement and reduce the sharp inequities of achievement among various demographic subgroups (i.e., students with limited English proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, those with disabilities, major racial and ethnic groups, and gender).[1] Locale is *not* one of the relevant grouping schemes, although leaders in rural places have voiced concerns about meeting requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.[2]

With respect to the achievement of rural students as a group, however, the best evidence is clear: rural achievement does not differ from that in other locales, once appropriate statistical controls are imposed.[3] In other words, the same inequities that characterize the nation generally are manifest in rural places, but their specific manifestations differ. The rural difference lies in how these inequities are structured in rural places, the nature of their dynamics there, and the meanings made of their circumstances by those who experience and sponsor such inequities in rural places.

The overall reality of "no significant difference," of course, masks substantial variability, including the variability in rural locales across states, as well as the

variability in differences between rural and other locales within states. This generalization is illustrated empirically by Lee and McIntire's careful study of state-level variability in the rural–nonrural disparities of achievement in mathematics. The evidence in the study that substantiates the connection between professional development and student achievement, although interesting, is comparatively weak. The study does, however, provide some evidence of the association between six conditions of schooling and rural achievement, and two of these are logically related to high-quality teaching: (1) professional training and (2) collective support. [4]

The Empirical Connection between Professional Development and Achievement

Policymakers and educators see professional development as a way to improve the *quality of instruction* in classrooms across the nation, but the empirical literature linking professional development to *improved student achievement* is extremely thin. According to one team of researchers,

> Little high-quality research has been conducted on the relationship between characteristics of professional development and change in teachers' classroom teaching practice, and still less has been conducted on the relationship between characteristics of professional development and gains in student achievement. [5]

Logically, though, it would seem that the right kinds of professional development would improve instruction, and that better instruction would result in higher student achievement. Very limited empirical evidence suggests that such linkages may exist.

Quite a number of studies report that teachers believe professional development improves their teaching. [6] A few studies— particularly case studies—report changes in teachers' practice that seem to result from their participation in professional development. [7] In addition, some experimental evidence suggests that certain instructional practices that teachers can learn to deploy are, in the main, somewhat more successful than other practices. [8]

Other research is less sanguine, however, suggesting that traditional teaching often persists even after participation in programs that seek to foster improved instructional practice. [9] Furthermore, an accumulating body of research about teachers who "add value" (i.e., help student achieve at higher-than-expected levels, given their previous attainment) suggests that high-performance teaching

has less to do with particular instructional practices than it does with content knowledge[10] or with some as-yet-undiscovered set of characteristics. [11]

Given the mixed reviews, policymakers may need to think about professional development not as a direct means to improve student achievement but as a long-term strategy for building instructional capacity. With increased capacity, schools have more hope of exerting positive impact on the performance of students. One still needs to ask, however, what features of professional development actually might serve to increase schools' instructional capacity.

Three Proposed Principles of Organizational Learning

Limited research exists on capacity building in schools in particular, but there is a more extensive literature on capacity building in organizations in general. Recent organizational research and theory reveal three principles proposed to undergird effective organizational learning and thereby contribute to expanded organizational capacity:

1. Learning must be situated. [12]

2. Learning requires open and sustained dialog among members of the organization. [13]

3. Learning depends upon the propensity to reflect on data about organizational performance. [14]

Several approaches to professional development draw on these principles.

Professional learning communities. Some authors have advocated sustained programs of school-level professional development under the aegis of "the professional learning community."[15] With this approach, all educators in a school assume responsibility for students' success by themselves becoming learners. Educators engage in learning collaboratively and share widely what they learn. Typically, the focus of professional learning communities is on teaching practice, so these efforts feature reflective inquiry in a variety of ways.

Data-based improvement. Grounded in management approaches such as Total Quality Management, some improvement strategies involve educators in the establishment of standards and benchmarks followed by an ongoing process of assessment and classroom-level reform. The Malcolm Baldrige program is perhaps the best-known approach of this type, but there are other, less prescriptive

alternatives.[16] With all such approaches, the processes used to set standards and periodically assess performance constitute professional development. One study of six schools that adopted data-based improvement found variable levels of success; in the schools where the program was most successful, teachers were more reflective and the school culture became more "professional."[17]

Reflective inquiry. Somewhat more narrowly defined than programs of data-based improvement or those cultivating professional learning communities are strategies that involve teachers in systematic examination of their instructional practice. Early efforts of this type—with names such as "peer coaching" and "collegial supervision"—organized small groups of teachers to observe one another's instructional performance and provide feedback.[18]

Other strategies engage the learning environment less directly. For example, in schools making use of reforms sponsored by the Coalition of Essential Schools, teachers volunteer to join "critical friends groups," where they often use students' work to prompt discussions of teaching; sometimes these groups also collaborate to solve instructional problems.[19] A model known as "working on the work" helps teachers analyze assignments given to students as a way to think about the meaningfulness of classroom work and the intellectual challenge it affords.[20]

A recent addition to this family of strategies is Japanese "lesson study." This approach, which has interested mathematics teachers in the United States, uses a systematic process in which changes to the delivery of a particular classroom lesson emerge from collaborative inquiry into its effectiveness.[21]

What About Knowledge of Subject Matter?

Although the strategies discussed above sometimes help teachers improve their knowledge of subject matter, more often they aim to help them improve pedagogy—their knowledge of *how* to teach. School boards and administrators typically assume that teachers arrive on the job with adequate knowledge of the content itself. But this may not be the case.[22] One study, for example, found that secondary science teachers in rural schools had completed fewer subject-matter courses in science than their counterparts elsewhere.[23] Another study found far more out-of-field teaching in schools that served poor and minority children.[24]

Nevertheless, teachers' knowledge of subject matter is associated with students' learning.[25] As a result, some reform efforts, particularly those in science and mathematics, have attempted to augment substantive knowledge via professional development. Often, however, the attempt fails because of limited time and resources.[26]

Formal instruction is the logical alternative. One domain for such effort is graduate course work (typically for already-practicing teachers). The other is the subject-matter preparation of preservice teachers (typically ages 18-22).

Graduate course work. In many states, teachers are required to renew their licenses through the completion of graduate course work.[27] Most enroll in professional education courses. Many fewer teachers take graduate courses in the disciplines they teach. This situation is unlikely to improve the subject-matter knowledge of the teaching workforce very much. Although practicing teachers often complain that formal course work is not useful in helping them solve their classroom problems, some prefer formal course work because it is more sustained and far more systematic than most other professional development efforts.[28]

Preservice course work. Course work for undergraduates (often called "preservice education") is one place where teachers' knowledge of subject matter might be conveniently strengthened. But efforts to improve teacher preparation have tended to focus much more on professional education courses (typically the portion of their program offered in a college or school of education) than on course work in subject matter (typically the portion of their program offered in a college of arts and sciences). Only a few universities have attempted to improve teacher preparation as a university-wide effort.[29]

The Rural Circumstance and Professional Development for Teachers

As suggested previously, the issues characterizing the rural circumstance pertain to the different structure, dynamics, and cultural meanings present there. These features of the rural circumstance are constituted only in part by the inequities prevalent in U.S. society. In part, however, they are constituted by the strengths of local rural communities. These differences, therefore, *ought not* to be viewed as deficiencies, even when they represent challenges. Such differences circumscribe professional development in rural places, and their role is interpreted in the following discussion. Our interpretation is based

principally on the broad insights from rural scholarship in fields other than education. This turn is necessary because no solid empirical work on effective rural professional development exists.

Structure. Rural schools and districts tend to be smaller than the suburban districts often celebrated as models of excellence in American schooling, and much smaller than the urban schools and districts considered the disasters of American schooling. In many places, the small size of schools and districts promotes cooperation among teachers, enabling them to improve instruction in ways that develop naturally within the context of their daily practice.[30]

In smaller schools and districts, staffing is drawn primarily from the local population, among whom school jobs are coveted, partly because they permit local people to remain in the places to which they are attached—an important and prevalent rural value.[31] Moreover, attachment to place can sustain teachers' and principals' dedication to fostering educational excellence, although smallness sometimes seems to constrain such efforts.[32]

These conditions impose certain limits on districts' capacity to secure high-quality teaching, in that recruitment of *better teachers* than already exist represents a very minor opportunity in most rural places. Instead, *better teaching* must be cultivated among the existing workforce. Professional development would logically aim at building local capacity among educators dedicated to improving the quality of life in the place where they live, and where, in fact, they most probably grew up. Arguably, the content and purposes of such professional development would build on this dedication to locality, but current efforts seldom do this.[33]

Recent recommendations, notably those focusing on professional learning communities, recommend that educators support one another in addressing the problems of practice encountered in their own classrooms. Professional development in keeping with these recommendations would *necessarily* involve educators in efforts to solve problems unique to their local circumstances. Examples of the problems that rural educators might focus on are (1) difficulties that students encounter in code-switching between informal dialect and the formal language of schooling, (2) the lack of appreciation among some parents and community members for certain academic subjects of study, and (3) limited exposure by some rural students to a diverse group of peers.

A finance issue also bears on the challenge of providing professional development because rural districts are property-poor in comparison to urban and suburban districts, and therefore local tax resources to fund high-quality professional development programs are unusually meager.[34] The development of *rural-responsive professional development* requires additional funding, but it remains a largely unaddressed challenge.[35]

Dynamics. Rural places differ from one another, and as a result organizational dynamics in rural places are contingent on the great variety of local conditions.[36] Nevertheless, the close-knit network of relationships in most rural districts fosters a characteristic set of organizational dynamics. The list for consideration is very long, but two prominent dynamics are examined next, merely to illustrate the sorts of issues they implicate. The two dynamics examined here involve professional isolation and a culturally instilled reluctance to criticize professional behaviors.

First, educators tend to experience professional isolation in rural schools because teaching specialties do not enjoy critical mass in any but the largest of these schools.[37] A lone high school math teacher may constitute the entire mathematics faculty in some rural places, for instance. In such a case, a strategy for fostering professional learning communities, for example, might be to network faculty from several districts. This is a relatively uncommon step among district-level professional development programs, including those in rural places, where it is arguably very appropriate. Alternatively, leaders might seek to establish cross-disciplinary learning communities within a school, an approach of recognized difficulty in higher education.[38] Some experimental programs in higher education, however, suggest that a more promising approach for K-12 educators might involve the establishment of virtual learning communities that foster collegial dialog among subject-matter specialists across the distances that physically separate them.[39]

Second, substantive professional development in rural districts will inevitably sponsor difficult discussions about teaching, and these could become sources of tension and even animosity. This poses a problem, given the dynamics of social interaction that often prevail in rural places. Rural places, in general, operate in less formal modes than other places. Impersonality and social distance, key features of professional demeanor, are neither prized nor cultivated in the civic life of many rural communities.[40] Despite their professional training, moreover, rural teachers understandably retain the social practices cultivated by their upbringing and reinforced by their everyday experience. These practices (e.g., non-confrontation and

risk avoidance) tend to foster acceptance rather than critique of the behavior of others, and they lead many rural educators to prefer tradition over untested change.

Instead of denying the conventional practices that sustain life in rural communities, or overlooking them, rural-responsive professional development ought to engage them. After all, these conventions do enable rural people to interact with one another in meaningful ways throughout their entire lifetimes.[41] Nevertheless, the education profession shows very little appreciation for the functionality of these practical necessities of rural life; as a result, dealing directly with nonconfrontation, risk avoidance, and other conventions of interaction in rural places remains an unacknowledged challenge for rural professional development.

Cultural meanings. Because of the salience of context to learning ("situated learning"), the cultural meanings that pervade everyday life in rural places have relevance for the development of rural teachers. Such meanings, however, are not widely understood or appreciated outside the pale of rural scholarship, quite likely because such meanings are represented neither in preservice schooling nor in professional development.[42] These meanings include (1) attachment to place; (2) strong commitment to community well-being; (3) connection to outdoor pursuits and the natural environment; and (4) concern for the long-term endurance and stability of life-in-place.[43] The latter concern, which Raymond Williams characterizes as an unfulfilled concern for a *settled rural existence* is, in fact, culturally discordant with national values.[44]

Some have argued that the strongest need for professional development anywhere is for high-quality programs. The clear difficulty in this instance is that such high-quality programs—ones that are very good *and* that actively engage rural meanings—rarely exist, even though 49 percent of American districts are located in rural places.[45] Professional development on behalf of place, community, a land ethic, and sustainability would depend on a different view of what the education of educators entails. Rather than focusing primarily on the improvement of their technical competence, such initiatives might work on the arguably more worthy project of helping them grow as individuals and citizens. Engagement with professional development conceived in this way might entail conversations among teachers about the ethics of professional practice, the linkages between schooling and broader community purposes, or the creation of mechanisms for grounding curriculum and instruction in the civic and economic life of a rural place.

Conclusions

As the discussion above suggests, rural districts do face challenges with regard to the cultivation of a teaching force that possesses subject-matter expertise, willingness to undertake difficult professional work at the local level, and attentiveness to rural practices and meanings. Clearly, such districts need support.

At the same time, they harbor significant strengths—structural as well as dynamic and cultural. Professional development in many of these places is positioned to exploit the smallness of the school organizations, the personal character of the relationships among staff, and the active engagement of educators with the life of the community. Many rural districts, moreover, offer conditions that enable educators to draw on "situated" meanings and to engage in ongoing professional dialog.

But the difficult charge of undertaking professional development that is rurally appropriate calls for more, not fewer, resources. So too does the provision of subject-matter preparation to those rural educators who are teaching out-of-field. And the professional development dollars available to rural districts are often woefully inadequate. Moreover, like districts everywhere, rural districts have limited experience using local data to stimulate instructional improvement.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications are clear. Poorly resourced districts—like most rural districts—cannot position themselves to express market demand for high-quality professional development that engages rural meanings and is appropriate to the structure and dynamics of rural systems. They are, of course, even less likely to be able to originate rural-responsive professional development as a bootstrap operation.

Recommendations. The central dilemma of professional practice is that swift action, with the expectation of immediate results, is the nature of business-as-usual. Given the relentlessness of this requirement, the findings of research make contributions that are distinctive but necessarily contingent. The following recommendations recognize that fact:

1. State and national policymakers need to find ways to help rural districts enter the marketplace on the demand side in order to stimulate the supply of rural-responsive professional development.

2. Because rural districts need the economic power to

enter the marketplace in this way, policy instruments need to be fashioned to develop and sustain their economic leverage. These instruments might, for instance, include (a) adequate provision for this purpose in school funding formulas, (b) provision to reward rural districts that pool existing professional development dollars for this purpose, and (c) state-level professional development supplements targeted at enabling districts to purchase rural-responsive professional development.

3. State and national policymakers need to offer incentives to institutions of higher education that find inventive ways to bring subject-matter course work to rural educators whose academic preparation is inadequate. Extensive support is required, however, in order to offset the resistance to such initiatives that university incentive structures (e.g., tenure and promotion guidelines, the privileging of research over teaching and service) tend to sustain.

4. State and national policymakers need to support research and development initiatives that provide rural districts with access to rural-responsive professional development products created by educators with wide experience of the rural circumstance.

5. Local education policymakers and school leaders need to become adept at using existing products and services that provide full-text access to rural-responsive educational materials, including relevant research.

6. Policymakers at all levels need to support efforts that cultivate school districts' capacity to make meaningful use of local data. In order to prevent the all-too-easy misuse of this powerful strategy, such efforts must focus on both the technical adequacy of data and the dynamics of data-driven improvement.

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