

Rethinking the Rural Practicum

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Abstract

This study explores and evaluates a rural practicum experience for pre-service Master of Arts in Teaching students. Using questionnaires, journal analysis, and interviews we share the experience from pre-service teachers' point of view. We learn about their attitudes about rural schools and rural school students. We asked, "does the experience increase the likelihood of participants accepting a teaching position in a rural school" and "does a rural practicum experience change pre-service teacher's attitudes about rural schools and rural students?" As a result of this intercultural experience, pre-service teachers develop a consciousness of other cultural perspectives they can apply to their practice.

Rethinking the Rural Practicum

In our Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) Program pre-service teachers may participate in our Rural Practicum Experience (RPE). The RPE consists of a four to five day experience in which pairs of MAT pre-service teachers visit rural areas in Alaska and work with a teacher at the community's school. Nearly all of our pre-service teachers choose to take advantage of this opportunity. They first fly to an Alaskan 'hub' town, a trip of over 500 miles. Once there, pairs of pre-service teachers board smaller (sometimes very small) planes to the airport, airstrip, flat area, frozen lake or frozen river that is nearest their destination. This is still not likely to be their final stop; they usually continue to travel by snow machine or all-terrain vehicle to the village.

The explicit goal of the RPE is to encourage MAT pre-service teachers to seek positions in rural schools. Implicitly we hope that by interacting with the people in a majority Alaska Native community our pre-service teachers will gain cultural knowledge and awareness leading to increased positive attitudes about rural Alaska communities, schools, and people.

Alaska Native students represent twenty-two percent of the state wide student population but this percentage increases to over ninety-eight percent in most rural areas (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2010). Students in Alaska's rural communities attend school in 290 small towns, villages, and remote outposts spread over half a million square miles of difficult and often severely isolated geography. Alaska's rural schools are individually and collectively unique. These are isolated sites and student attendance is often dependent on the hunting and fishing schedules of the community. They comprise about 60% of Alaska's school districts, 50% of its schools, and 40% of its population. Not surprisingly then, a large proportion of jobs for teachers in Alaska are found in rural settings. The vast majority of teachers in these

rural schools are white and the majority come from outside of Alaska (Alaska Teacher Placement 2010).

Historically, the relationship between Alaskan Natives and non-Natives developed in considerably different ways than in than elsewhere in the United States the effect being that the legal position of Alaska Natives is unique among Native Americans. The majority of Alaskan Natives have never lived within reservations, but in their own traditional communities and, particularly in remote areas, have been affected very little by non-Native culture (Johnson, 2001). Shifting and contradictory policy decisions by the federal government and the absence of treaties with Alaska Natives contribute to current ambiguities about rights and responsibilities, both legal and social. To counteract this ambiguity many Alaska Native communities are establishing or strengthening their own institutions: tribal courts, tribal councils, and schools (Korsmo, 1994). Under current federal law, tribes can control their own schools; a major obstacle is the reluctance of the State of Alaska to transfer existing school facilities to tribal councils because the state continues to oppose tribal sovereignty in Alaska (Korsmo). If the definition of a nation as a community of people sharing a unified social community, common territory, and self-imposed government structures is accepted, then many rural Alaskan communities can claim nationhood. This makes the RPE not only an intercultural experience, but in some ways an intranational one as well.

Theoretical considerations

The literature suggests potential benefits of the rural practicum experience for pre-service teachers: connecting and networking with teachers in remote areas; experiencing the realities of rural living and teaching; expanding their career prospects, and exposure to a culture different from their own (Boylan, 2004; Gibson, 1994; Lock, 2007; Munsch & Boylan 2008; Sleeter,

2001). Sharplin found that many pre-service teachers' ideas about rural teaching were based on negative misconceptions. Sharplin's findings suggest that pre-service teachers have under-informed and stereotyped attitudes about the rural and remote teaching experience. These "simultaneously idyllic and horrific" misconceptions reduced the likelihood of pre-service teachers considering a rural teaching assignment (Sharplin, 2002).

A study by Lock (2007) looked at the effect of participation in a rural practicum on urban Australian pre-service teacher's decision to seek a rural teaching assignment. Seventy-three percent of participants reported that following participation in the program they were encouraged to apply for rural teaching assignments. Participants in this study also reported they gained knowledge about school-community relationships in rural places. Further, Boylan & Wallace (2002) and Munsch and Boylan (2008) found pre-service teachers who participated in a rural practicum in Alaska had increased understanding of rural teaching in general and felt better prepared to seek a rural teaching assignment. In general, research indicates new teachers that do choose to accept a rural school position have participated in a rural practicum as part of their pre-service experience (Boylan & Hemmings, 1992; Gibson, 1994; Ralph, 2002; and Halsey, 2005). While these studies address the decision to teach in a rural community, they do not deal with the more crucial factor- attitude change.

Researchers have found mixed results related to attitude change in programs such as ours where multicultural coursework is combined with a field experience. Studies by Bondy, Schmitz & Johnson (1993), Grottgau & Nickolai-Mays (1989), Mason (1997), and Wiggins & Follo (1999) found positive changes in attitude among pre-service teachers who completed both multicultural coursework and the field experience. In contrast, Haberman & Post (1992) and Reed (1993) found field experiences, such as a rural practicum, are interpreted through the

preconceptions of the participants and pre-service teachers existing stereotypes, positive and negative, are reinforced by the fieldwork experience.

Attitudes, including stereotypes, induce biases in social perception. Eagly and Chaiken (1998) describe the tendency to selectively perceive and interpret social information in a way that is consistent with one's held attitudes. For example, upon visiting a rural Alaska village, an individual who holds negative perceptions of Alaska Natives will likely notice events consistent with that attitude and even believe those events occur more frequently than they do in reality. According to Stroessner & Plaks (2001), such illusory correlations are a common way people confirm their expectations. The pre-service teachers in the Haberman & Post (1992) and Reed (1993) studies exemplify this principle. People are likely to interpret what they see to match their attitudes rather than change their attitudes to match objective reality.

Method

Design

The design strategy of this study is based in naturalistic inquiry, examining a real world situation, without manipulating it, as it unfolds (Patton, 2002). By taking a discovery oriented naturalistic approach to inquiry the researcher can see things people in the setting may miss. In this study the researcher has direct contact with and engages the participants, experiences the settings, and so the researcher's insights are part of the inquiry and become critical to understanding. A variety of qualitative data is collected. Open ended questions are asked in pencil and paper questionnaires and during interviews. Open ended questions create a space for participants to share what is salient and meaningful from their personal perspective. To develop a story, both general themes and individual's quotations are presented along with analysis of participant's journals. Journal analysis is approached as a "sense-making" effort (Patton, 2002)

where patterns, themes, and shared meanings are extracted-qualitative content analysis. The goal of this qualitative content analysis is to identify important themes within participants Power Point journals and to present thick descriptions of participant's experiences, knowledge and attitudes.

This study seeks to understand the dynamic processes among people and settings that naturally emerge from the data without making a priori assumptions through inductive analysis. The aim of this analysis is to maintain and "empathetic neutrality" (Patton, 2002) where authenticity, balance, and completeness is achieved. In addition to the responses of the participants, the researcher will draw on personal knowledge, intuition, and tacit understandings as part of the formal interpretation stage. Analytical integrity will be sought by engage in a systematic search for alternative explanations by having a second person analyze the data for patterns. Furthermore, alternative conclusions are presented and discussed.

A variety of qualitative data is collected. Open ended questions are asked in pencil and paper questionnaires and during interviews. Open ended questions create a space for participants to share what is salient and meaningful from their personal perspective. To develop a story, both general themes and individual's quotations are presented along with analysis of participant's journals. Journal analysis is approached as a "sense-making" effort (Patton, 2002) where patterns, themes, and shared meanings are extracted-qualitative content analysis. The goal of this qualitative content analysis is to identify important themes within participants Power Point journals and to present thick descriptions of participant's experiences, knowledge and attitudes.

Participants

Participants in this investigation are fifty-two pre-service teachers. They represent four one year cohort groups over three years. At the time of their participation, pre-service teachers

were halfway through their third semester of the program. While strongly encouraged to participate in the Rural Practicum Experience, pre-service teachers in the program are not required to visit a rural community and school.

Data sources

Questionnaires.

Questionnaires are based on Sharplin's (2002) study that found that many pre-service teachers' ideas about rural teaching were based on negative misconceptions. Specifically, Sharplin reported pre-service teacher attitudes about teaching resources, and professional and social isolation and pre-teacher fears about adjusting to rural life, social isolation, and support networks. A variety of qualitative data is collected. Open ended questions are asked in pencil and paper questionnaires and during interviews. Open ended questions create a space for participants to share what is salient and meaningful from their personal perspective. To develop a story, both general themes and individual's quotations are presented along with analysis of participant's journals. Journal analysis is approached as a "sense-making" effort (Patton, 2002) where patterns, themes, and shared meanings are extracted-qualitative content analysis. The goal of this qualitative content analysis is to identify important themes within participants Power Point journals and to present thick descriptions of participant's experiences, knowledge and attitudes.

The Pre-rural Practicum and Post-rural Practicum Questionnaires developed for this study consists of ten open-ended questions that ask about teaching and living in a rural and/or isolated environment:

- What beliefs do you have about teaching in a rural school?

- What do you believe are the greatest personal and social challenges to teaching in a rural school?
- What do you believe are the greatest professional challenges to teaching in a rural school?
- What are your greatest fears about teaching in a rural school?
- Are there other issues that concern you as a beginning teacher in a rural school?
- Do you intend to apply for teaching positions in a rural school?

The questionnaire also has one forced answer question about their intent to teach in a rural school: “Right now, what is the likely hood you would accept a position in a rural school?

Participants must choose form one of the following responses: ‘Definitely would not’, ‘Not likely’, ‘I would consider it’, ‘I want to teach in the Bush’.

Two additional questions appear on the Post-rural Practicum Questionnaire:

- I now have a better understanding of the challenges and rewards of teaching in a rural school
- I now have a better understanding of students who come from rural schools and communities.

Both of these questions required force choice responses: ‘Strongly Disagree’, ‘Disagree’, ‘Agree’, or ‘Strongly Agree’.

Pre-service teachers completed the Pre-rural Practicum Questionnaire two months prior to their Rural Practicum Experience. I wanted to gather their perceptions before they actually began planning for the trip or knew the exact location they were visiting. I felt that if I questioned them too closely to the experience itself, I would get responses that might be influenced by the excitement and anxiety of the event itself. One week after their return from the

practicum, pre-service teachers were given the Post-rural Practicum Questionnaire. Pre-service teachers were given the questionnaires in a group setting, but were asked not to share their answers until all the questionnaires had been completed and collected.

Power Point Journals.

The only instructions given to participants about the Power Point Journal were that it should be not be a travel log and that it should reflect their personal perceptions and experiences. PowerPoint journals were sent to the researcher electronically by participants within two weeks following the experience.

Interviews.

Participants were interviewed within three weeks after the Practicum Experience. Interviews lasted ten to twenty minutes and consisted of two questions: What did you learn from the experience and what did you learn about rural students?

Analysis

Various methodologies have been proposed for analyzing open-ended responses. For the purpose of this study, a content analysis procedure (Patton, 2002) was selected because it allows an understanding of people's personal perceptions to be determined in a scientific manner. Our content analysis took the following steps: (a) review data; (b) analyze and group similar ideas into categories; (c) identify units of analysis by highlighting all references to a particular topic within an entry; (d) define categorized responses by using the developed coding system; (e) refine categories by selecting a small sample of the units of analysis to assure a fit into categories, discarding some as appropriate, and or creating new categories; and (f) establish category integrity through inter-rater agreement. Responses on the questionnaire, journals, and

interviews were first coded separately, and then themes and examples of themes from all three sources were combined.

Results

Content analyses of the Pre-Rural Practicum questionnaire reveal pre-service teachers held negative attitudes around three themes: ‘rural Alaska Native communities are unwelcoming’, ‘rural Alaska schools are inferior’ and ‘rural Alaska Native communities are dysfunctional’. Content analysis of the Post-Rural Practicum questionnaire, journals, and interviews indicates substantial attitude change occurred. The themes ‘unwelcoming’ and ‘schools are inferior’ nearly disappeared and did not occur at all in journals; in fact, photographs presented in the journals demonstrate the opposite is true. However, the theme ‘rural Alaska Native communities are dysfunctional’ persisted in the Post-Rural Practicum Questionnaire and is present in journals and interviews as well.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results from the additional questions in the Post-Rural Practicum Questionnaire, “I know have a better understanding of rural schools”, and “I now have a better understanding of students from rural schools and communities” supports content analysis results. The ‘better understanding of rural schools’ perceived by participants may have impacted their attitudes about rural schools leading to the substantially fewer occurrences of comments in the ‘rural Alaska schools are inferior’ theme in the post-test, journals and interviews. The “better understanding of students from rural schools and communities” perceived by participants may have impacted their

attitudes about rural students leading to pre-service teachers expressed concerns about access for these students in urban schools shared during interviews.

Insert Table 2 about here

Journals begin to elucidate the cognitive disequilibrium, reasoning and learning stimulated by contradictions, conflict, and anomalies, (Piaget, 1985) pre-service teachers experienced. Photos were generally positive: panoramic images reveling in the stark beauty of Alaska interspersed with images of beautifully appointed classrooms and smiling children. These photos contrast to the negative tone of the picture captions which persist on the theme, “rural Alaska Native communities are dysfunctional”

As to a whether our Rural Practicum Experience increases the likelihood pre-service teachers will consider teaching in rural Alaska little change was seen. While the number of participants who said “definitely not” decreased, the number of “would consider” also decreased. The two participants who responded “I want to teach in a rural school” are in fact the same two respondents, in both the pre- and post- test case.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

These findings suggest using the rural practicum as a means to encourage students to accept positions in rural schools may be unrealistic. It is clear that the experience did not excite anyone, who was not already desirous, to take on the challenge of rural, and in this case, remote teaching. Some attitude change did occur however. Knowledge gained from the Rural

Practicum Experience impacted attitudes about the ‘welcomingness’ of communities and the quality of rural schools. In general, the responses of participants in this study support Sleeter (2001); that the effects of a fieldwork experience have mixed results. Haberman & Post (1992) and Reed (1993) found field experiences are interpreted through the preconceptions of the participants and often stereotypes are reinforced. The attitude that was not changed, the idea that rural Alaska Native communities are dysfunctional, is interesting because it is the attitude most closely akin to racial prejudice; this despite an explicit effort in the program to create cultural consciousness and dispel prejudices among our pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers take an advanced multicultural education course, an Alaska studies course, and a course on inclusion as well as participating in an overall course of study that is infused with explicit teachings and experiences related to diversity. The persistence of negative attitudes, despite these efforts, aligns with the work of Eagly and Chaiken (1998), Stroessner and Plaks (2001), Haberman and Post (1992), and Reed (1993), that people are likely to interpret what they see to match their attitudes rather than change their attitudes to match objective reality.

For those pre-service teachers that do decide to take rural positions the practicum can provide necessary knowledge about rural Alaska Native students prior to their arriving as teachers at the school. Because teachers who do accept positions in Alaska’s rural schools are predominantly white, the RPE, if structured properly, could become an orientation of sorts for them (we know who they are prior to the practicum), where they seek to develop particular knowledge and examine some of their attitudes about rural schools and Alaska Natives preemptively. In most cases this kind of growth has to occur simultaneously with the struggles of the first months of school.

A large majority of participants made the unanticipated connection between their rural experience and the teaching they will likely do in an urban Alaska setting. Interview analysis yielded two additional themes: pre-service teachers recognize the need to help rural student's transitions to much larger and more structured urban school environments, and pre-service teachers reflected on how they will respond to students and families from rural areas when they arrive in urban classrooms. They talked about the access and equity issues rural students will face in urban schools. They recognized and anticipated the difficulties these students might have as they "Transitioned to an urban school structure that did not accommodate their culture" and that rural students and families in larger Alaska cities might feel "disoriented and afraid".

Given that communities in rural Alaska show a consistent pattern of out-migration since 1990 (Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 2008), this is a highly relevant recognition. Sixty percent of people migrating out of rural Alaskan villages report they are unlikely to return to the village (Martin et al.). Children who once attended small village schools enroll in large urban schools with teachers and staff who likely have little understanding of village life (O'Malley and Hopkins, 2008). The majority of teachers are white, middle-class, urban, and generally limited in their knowledge of or experience with diverse cultures (Sleeter, 2001). It is important then that pre-service teachers understand and appreciate the lives and educational backgrounds of the rural Alaska Native students who come to their urban classrooms, this is an important result. Preparing pre-service teachers for changing student populations means they must learn about the cultures and needs of diverse children (Banks, 1981; Gay, 2000, Sleeter, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lee, 2007) knowledge pre-serviced teachers gained from the RPE.

But why did the pre-service teachers make this connection? It was their own intercultural and intranational experience that made them attuned to and appreciative of the experience

students may have. Before the RPE pre-service teachers perceived rural Alaska as a place different from urban Alaska and populated by majority Alaska Natives, but they did not fully understand that real cultural borders separate urban from rural and white from native and that crossing these borders can be literally perceived.

Of the over 600,000 people living in Alaska in 2010, about 100,000 referred to themselves as Alaska Natives. The term Alaska Native signifies three primary culture groups: Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut; and four Native language families: Eskimo-Aleut, Athabascan-Eyak, Tsimshian, and Haida). These language families include 20 more distinct Alaska Native languages (Barnhardt, 2006). The diverse and often isolated geographic areas in which Alaska Native people live require distinct life styles that incorporate a broad range of subsistence, travel, trade, social, communication, and political structure practices (Barnhardt). Each rural community has a distinct lifestyle where trucks, computers, and well appointed school buildings coexist with working dogs and drying racks. And although every community has a modern store, most communities rely on subsistence hunting and fishing to supply the bulk of their food. One pre-service teacher, exhilarated by the experience, shared, “The community I visited was free from the stress of a western conception of time, they valued people and place not things, and it was restfully quiet”. Not all perceptions were this positive. Pre-service teachers existing prejudices were evident but despite this, the recognition of a clear difference remains: “I did not find like minded- people there, could we talk about the arts?” and “they don’t have the values for school, I am afraid I might be chased out for my beliefs”. Differences in perceptions about schools are clear to pre-service teachers, “People [in the villages] are extremely resistant to the idea of education and the white man coming in to educate their children when they believe it is something they should do for and by themselves”. Other pre-service teachers concur, “I truly

believe that education is important for these communities aside from the education children gain from the elders”, and “I think there are kids in rural areas that without a teacher from outside will never get a quality education, not all rural communities believe that education is important”.

While these comments elucidate pre-service teacher’s prejudices as well, they also demonstrate that clear cultural difference about the process and function of education exist and were evident.

Pre-service teachers noticed what they often described as a “disregard” for the accepted structures of school, “The students are absent frequently and not for good reason, they miss school when cousins visit, they miss school to go hunting and they are late to school every day”. The practical necessities in a rural village were noted by one, “The school is used for every aspect of community life, it is viewed by the people in the community as a multi-purpose building where some of the time kids go to school”. Some did recognize the value of an alternative view of education, “It is nearly impossible to engage a third grader in a math lesson when the musk ox are nearby, and who could blame him, I would have rather been out watching the musk ox too, plenty to learn from that experience I am sure”.

Faced with their experienced reality challenging their beliefs, it was their own disequilibrium that allowed them to recognize the possible disequilibrium of others, in this case rural students who find themselves in urban schools. Using this experience of disequilibrium and subsequent development of an outward directed cultural consciousness teaching programs can better structure practicum experiences to confront negative attitudes held by pre-service teachers. Attitudes about Alaska Natives, rural students, and minority students in general can be addressed. These changes in how teacher educators purpose the rural practicum may be a small step toward achieving some equity for minority students, urban or rural, if the practicum moves beyond a job recruitment tool and is used as a means to develop ideas about social justice.

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Table 1

Themes from Content Analysis of Questionnaires, Journals and Interviews with Examples and Occurrences

Theme	Examples	Pre-test	Post-test	Journals	Interviews
“Rural Alaska Native communities are unwelcoming”	<p>“I think they will treat me like an outsider”</p> <p>“They will be prejudiced against me because I am white”</p> <p>“They will treat me differently because I am not like them”</p> <p>“I will be an outsider in a closed community”</p>	63	12	0	0
“Rural Alaska schools are inferior”	<p>“Rural schools lack resources and are poorly funded”</p> <p>“Administrators do not support the teachers”</p>	65	35	0	0

“Teachers and administrators work
in the bush because they cannot get
a job anywhere else”

“Expectations for students are much
lower and they only teach to the
test”

<p>“Rural Alaska Native communities are dysfunctional”</p>	<p>“The people are closed minded- and anti-intellectual”</p> <p>“They need to learn the values people have in the lower 48”</p>	<p>26</p>	<p>20</p>	<p>22</p>	<p>18</p>
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“Families are dysfunctional, there is
a lot of child abuse”

“It is unsafe because of rampant
alcoholism”

Table 2

Responses to Additional Questions on Post-Rural Practicum Questionnaire

Response	Additional Question 1	Additional Question 2
	“I now have a better understanding of rural schools”	“I now have a better understanding of rural students and families”
Strongly Disagree	1	1
Disagree		
Agree	10	15
Strongly Agree	17	12

Table 3

Pre- and Post-test Results for Desire to Teach in a Rural School

	Pre-test	Post-test
Definitely not	6	2
Not likely	14	12
Would consider	18	12
I want to teach in a rural school	2	2
