Learning to Be Rural:
Lessons about Being Rural in Teacher Education Programs

Eric D. Moffa
Erin McHenry-Sorber

This qualitative study investigated the evolving perceptions of rurality of five Appalachian native, first-year teachers as influenced by their teacher preparation program. Findings suggested tensions between participants' rural upbringings and programmatic and non-rural peer conceptions of rurality that surfaced during their program of study. Responses to these tensions included participants positioning themselves as "rural representatives" in their courses and, in some cases, the adoption of revised conceptions of rurality. Intra-Appalachian diversity, such as different childhood community types and childhood social class, influenced participants' conceptualizations of rurality and their perceptions of its representation in their programs. The majority of participants perceived a trend toward generalized notions of rural place that were not necessarily representative of their personal experiences. Transitioning to first-year teachers, participants relied on their community-driven knowledge and teacher preparation to guide their practice in home or new rural, Appalachian communities.

Rurality and place are concepts that evade consensual definition (see Christiaens, 2015; Nespor, 2008), and are underutilized emphases in American teacher preparation programs. Barley's (2009) assessment of 120 mid-continent teacher preparation programs found only 17 had a rural emphasis and even fewer offered rural-focused courses or rural student-teaching placements. Consequently, early career teachers may leave preparation programs unprepared for rural placements and likely to seek employment in non-rural locales, exacerbating problems of rural teacher recruitment and retention (White & Kline, 2012) – critical concerns for rural schools (Collins, 1999; Monk, 2007).

White and Kline (2012) argue that rural-focused teacher education programs should illustrate for pre-service teachers "the links between the classroom, the school, and the wider rural community and their place across these three different contexts" (p. 40). Corbett (2016) argues rural teacher preparation should move beyond vocational training to "support ways of thinking about teaching in rural contexts that are non-standard and that directly address persistent and pressing rural problems such as: population loss, resource industry restructuring, resource depletion, environmental and habitat degradation and land use policy" (p. 147).

In fulfillment of calls to investigate teacher preparation for rural placements (White & Reid, 2008) and to improve the contextual knowledge necessary to prepare pre-service teachers for rural work (White & Kline, 2012), the current study reports perspectives on rurality and teacher education from five Appalachian-born, first-year teachers. Participants possessed a combination of Appalachian home contexts, recent collegiate experience, and current classroom practice that created distinct viewpoints on the connections between teacher preparation and conceptions of rurality and place. In-depth interviews enabled participants to illuminate the ways their conceptions of rurality intertwine with perceived representations of rurality in their teacher preparation programs and ultimately influence their early career practice. Findings highlight the complexity and interconnectivity of diverse rural spaces in Appalachia, including the interplay of social stratification in understandings of place, thereby problematizing generalized approaches to place-consciousness in rural teacher preparation.

Review of Related Literature: Preparing Teachers for Rural Places

Preparing successful teachers is a complex task, marked by a convergence of studies in pedagogy, content knowledge, and instructional technologies and shaped by multiple contexts, such as national and state policies, institutions, and local districts and labor markets (Grossman & McDonald, 2008). Grossman and McDonald (2008) argue that research in teacher education has been detached from the contexts that influence it, leaving a gap in knowledge about "the relationship between the demands and needs of the local setting to the actual practice of teacher education" (p. 194). In general terms, scholars suggest teacher education programs should

offer a coherent vision of teaching and learning integrated across courses and field placements (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005, p. 392) and prospective teachers should be made aware of the influence of social contexts on schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This review of the literature synthesizes research along these dimensions with a focused lens on rural and Appalachian teacher preparation, including preparation centered on rural social space and the use of rural practicums and grow-your-own programs as avenues to integrate preparation with local rural contexts.

Rural Social Space. Rural education scholars advocate for pre-service teachers to be prepared for "rural social space" (Reid, et al., 2010), or the unique characteristics of rural schools and communities (White & Kline, 2012). Theobald (1997) suggests that teachers possessing place-based knowledge can provide students a chance to re-engender mutual commitment and responsibility to a community, thereby strengthening democracy, and becoming "stewards of the intellectual life in their communities" (p. 114).

While knowledge of "rural social space" appears to be a preferred component of successful rural teacher preparation, some sociologists suggest social and economic trends in contemporary society dictate a more complex approach towards understanding rurality, problematizing place-conscious rural teacher preparation. In Lichter and Brown's (2011) discussion of the interconnectivity of urban and rural spaces, they suggest 21st century careers often span urban, suburban, and rural spatial and societal boundaries, or place people in areas where rural-urban distinctions are blurred or shifting. For example, high achieving young adults are moving out of rural areas in search of college and career opportunities (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), and of adults who stay, 27% commute to work in another county (Brown, 2008). Bidirectional movements of social life between urban and rural require the preparation of teachers with contemporary complex conceptions of place.

The complexity of Appalachia as place. Our research focuses on first-year teachers in Appalachia, a historically economically and socially marginalized region in the U.S. (Scott, 2010). Some Appalachian school districts suffer from recruitment and retention issues. Geographically isolated and economically

distressed districts, in particular, offer little financial incentive or amenities to attract young teachers (Proffit, Sale, Alexander, & Andrews, 2004). Appalachian teachers are more likely to quit teaching than transfer between districts (Cowen, Butler, Fowles, Streams, & Toma, 2012).

The Appalachian region, while far from monolithic, tends be characterized by some commonalities, including: poverty, powerlessness, and the marginalization of its people (see Billings & Blee, 2000). While Appalachia suffers higher rates of poverty than most other regions (Billings & Blee, 2000), placing poverty and powerlessness at the center of regional assessments may limit more complex and nuanced cultural understandings. Appalachians self-identify as self-sufficient, morally upright, and neighborly and they possess a strong connection to family and community heritage (Keefe, 2000). Appalachian college students possess positive feelings towards their rural upbringing, placing value in the peace, safety, and caring of their rural homes, families, and small communities (Herzog & Pittman, 1995).

Reck, Reck, and Keefe (1987) asserted that most teachers transmit the existing social system by "reflecting and reinforcing that system" (p. 14), rather than improving upon it. More recently, Howley and Howley (2010) argued that Appalachia, as a largely resource extractive region, is particularly marked by the educational reproduction of class divisions and power relations, as teachers and administrators "establish, and exploit, a *determining* association between poverty and low achievement, so that poverty is not merely associated with, but caused by low achievement" (p. 42, italics in original). It follows, then, that teacher educators in Appalachia should prepare prospective teachers through the critical study of Appalachia as a diverse and complex region with place-specific, and more broadly experienced, challenges and strengths.

Rural Practicums and Grow-Your-Own Programs

Rural life, generally, is largely absent from university programs (McDonough, Gildersleeve, & Jarsky, 2010) limiting the potential for success of rural teacher preparation. Barley (2009) asserts this to be the case for the most particularistic challenges of rural teachers, including teaching multiple subjects and grade levels in multi-grade, and mixed-age classrooms, as teacher preparation programs tend to

be tailored towards the needs of urban or suburban schools for which these issues may lack applicability.

For rural teacher preparation programs to train successful rural teachers, it is important to understand and interrogate pervasive narratives of rural teaching. In a meta-analysis of literature on rural teachers from 1970 to 2010, Burton, Brown, and Johnson (2013) found that rural teachers are often portrayed as: (a) professionally isolated; (b) different from urban and/or suburban teachers; (c) lacking in professional knowledge/teaching credentials; and (d) particularly resistant to change. These depictions of rural teachers in the literature, however, may "speak to the pressing need for researchers to become reflective and critical of the ways in which their work implicitly and explicitly is a product of and helps to recreate these storylines" (p. 10).

Nuanced definitions of place in teacher preparation can assist in countering prejudices and antiquated stereotypes about rural people (see Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Theobald, 1997), and assist in reflective and critical research about the practice of rural teachers, in turn, advancing knowledge of successful rural teacher preparation practices. With interconnected and complex views of rural space, teacher preparation programs can focus on the sustainability of rural communities in an interconnected world (Reid, et al., 2010). Such programs might problematize place-specific concerns and inequitable power structures in rural locales while recognizing the interconnectedness of multiple places to each other and to broader spheres of influence (see Nespor, 2008).

Rural practicums are one of the most widely supported methods to instill knowledge of rural social space in pre-service teachers (Kline, White, & Lock, 2013). 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. American teacher education programs continue to fall short in providing these experiences for their students (Azano & Stewart, 2015; Barley, 2009; Horn, 1983; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999), in comparison to countries like Australia (see Kline et al., 2013).

Grow-your-own rural teacher education programs have been advocated as a method to address the challenge of teacher recruitment and retention in the Appalachian region (McClure & Reeves, 2004). The Appalachian Model Teaching Consortium provides a pipeline for local high school students to become teachers through studying at a community college prior to an intensive university teacher education program (Proffit et al., 2004). But it is not always the case that such teacher preparation programs exist in remote Appalachian regions; thus, many students attend large public institutions for teacher preparation located relatively far from home.

In response to Burton, et al.'s (2013) critique of scholarship on rural teachers, the present study utilizes early career rural teacher voices to understand the ways in which these teachers experience teaching in a rural place—specifically rural Appalachia—in relation to their experiences as Appalachian children. Moreover, this research highlights a continually evolving process of conceptualization influenced, in part, through participants' teacher education programs.

A Dearth of Knowledge about Rural Teacher Preparation

What are the experiences of early career teachers in Appalachian contexts? How do their teacher preparation programs influence their conceptions of and responses to these places? Existing deficits in rural-specific knowledge for teacher educators come in part from analogous methodologies across rural studies. Burton et al. (2013) found that 71% of research articles on rural teachers used surveys as the main agent of data collection – a method that often fails to uncover the organic experiences of rural teachers. Furthermore, even within rural research communities, Sherwood (2001) warns that some rural researchers apply an urban bias to rural scholarship and a deficit lens to rural areas.

While some studies examine pre-service teachers' perspectives of rurality (see Barter, 2008; Herzog & Pittman, 1995), they fail to encapsulate the full range of rural spatial negotiation by not exploring the influences of life prior to college enrollment (Barter, 2008) or the influence of college experiences on perceptions of rurality (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). The current study addresses this gap in the literature by examining how native, Appalachian, rural teachers perceive "being rural" in light of their upbringing, their teacher education programs, and the evolution of these perceptions through their first year of teaching in a rural place. This study privileges teacher voice as a means to reveal rural and Appalachian experience. Teacher education programs can use this undiluted, teacher-generated knowledge

in their considerations of teacher preparation for the realities of teaching in diverse rural contexts through the iterative valuing and critical interrogation of preconceived notions of rurality as a means to evaluate action in the rural classroom.

Methods

Our guiding research question was: How do teachers who grew up in rural communities perceive "being rural" in their university experiences, including their teacher preparation programs? The question produced findings that inform teacher educators about how teacher preparation is viewed by rural people who possess the lived experiences to validate depictions of rurality. Furthermore, findings also revealed the reciprocal relationship of rural pre-service teachers and university teacher preparation programs in their constructions of knowledge about rural places.

Participants

Five first-year Appalachian teachers were selected to participate in this study. Participants were purposely sampled based on the criterion that each grew up in a rural community prior to his or her enrollment in a large, public university teacher education program (see Patton, 2015). This criterion ensured our sample represented authentic perspectives on rural life. Participants fitting this criterion were found using researchers' contacts at a university. Due to the contacts' specializations in English Education, all participants were certified in this field. Students in this specialization would have had opportunities to take Appalachian-focused coursework among their program electives during their teacher preparation program. This Appalachian-focused coursework included courses on teaching Appalachia and literacy as social practice. First-year teachers were selected because of their ability to reflect on their collegiate experiences through multiple lenses – that of practitioner, recent college student, and native rural person. Participants' home towns were located in several different areas of Appalachia; they held employment in a variety of Appalachian schools; some working in their hometowns or counties, and others not; and some working in more remote schools than others. The variety of employment locales stayed true to the complex and often misunderstood nature of rural areas. It also elicited reflections on university teacher

preparation programs through different practitioner and place lenses – a form of multivocality (see Tracy, 2010).

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant and averaged just under an hour. They focused on participants' life experiences growing up rural, attending college, and transitioning to first-year teachers. To target the major research focus, researchers started with broad inquiries into participants' past experiences. This "funnel shaped interview" approach utilized indirect questions at the start to allow the participants to report on life events they deemed meaningful as rural experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 130). Then, participants were asked more direct questions about their collegiate experiences and current practice and how their previous experiences converged with understandings of rurality in their preparation and practice as rural teachers. The purpose of this interview approach was to elicit interconnectivity of place and self in different contexts over one's lifetime. In this way, the interviews could illuminate connections between conceptions of rurality, learning about rural areas in teacher preparation programs, and contextual knowledge gained from rural teaching positions.

Because interviews acted as the sole source of data, the researchers adopted several additional methodological practices to enhance the quality of data and the credibility of participants' perspectives. First, in a majority of the interviews (three out of five) both researchers were present. This enabled the simultaneous convergence of researcher perspectives. Furthermore, after each interview and following interview transcriptions, the researchers collaborated to share their thoughts both verbally and in written format. This included sharing memos, jottings, and codes with one another (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This continuous co-analysis acted to test one researcher's emergent interpretations against colleague interpretations. Tracy (2010) calls using multiple researchers a facet of crystallization as it opens up "a more complex, in-depth" understanding of the issue (p. 844). Crystallization is a form of triangulation better aligned with the social constructionist paradigm as it makes room for multiple truths and knowledge discrepancies.

Applying another facet of crystallization, the researchers purposely shifted theoretical perspectives to encourage more complex dimensions to emerge

from the data (Tracy, 2010). For example, in addition to the central social constructionist interpretations (see Crotty, 2003), data were reanalyzed through a socio-geographic lens to produce new angles of analysis and encourage more complex interpretations (Tracy, 2010). Socio-geography examines relationships between geographic characteristics and social life, as opposed to social constructionist lens that emphasizes people's interpretations of their culture and spaces. Lastly, the researchers ensured the presence of multivocality in their study, where focus was placed on participant voices that diverge with those of the majority and with the researchers (Tracy, 2010). Follow-up questions throughout the interviews explored nuanced meanings and encouraged deeper understanding of participants' perspectives.

Data Analysis

Analysis focused on uncovering emerging themes present in the data rather than on applying *a priori* theoretical frameworks (see Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Themes began to emerge through memo writing during interviews. After transcribing the interviews, data underwent a constant comparison analysis to elicit and refine themes relevant to answering the research question (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The constant comparison method allowed for early data analysis to influence later data collection. This process enabled participant voices to dictate what aspects of the phenomenon under study were important to them and directed the research process to unfold towards these ends. For example, early interviews pointed to the changing nature of rural communities' economies over participants' lifetimes, so later interviews sought to further explore this line of questioning and its impact on later participants' thoughts about rurality. This data analysis technique ensured participant perspectives guided research findings as opposed to researchers' theory-driven lenses. In the final phase of analysis, the researchers worked together to organize the emergent themes into the headings of the findings section as they relate to the research question. In the process, the researchers attempted to keep participants' descriptions and language intact to allow prominence for the participants' rural voices in the findings.

Researcher Positionality

Since the interview process co-constructs knowledge between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 18), the researchers believe it is important to state their own involvement with rural life. Both researchers are Appalachian natives. At the time of the study, one taught social studies at a public high school in his hometown while concurrently pursuing a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from an Appalachian university. The other researcher, who grew up in a different region of Appalachia than the first author, was a university professor and former rural teacher. Both researchers view identity as a multifaceted construct, where many different identities converge to form one's perspectives on social life. Yet, both researchers acknowledge they are, in some part, rural people themselves. This position grants a certain level of connectivity as within-community researchers; however, the researchers assume their rural identities differ from participants even within the Appalachian region as there are multiple social constructions of rurality. Collecting and analyzing data through a social constructionist lens allows for multiple truths to emerge from the data due to the context-bound, unfixed meanings that participants attached to their rural realities (see Crotty, 2003).

Findings

While this study examined the perspectives of five distinct participants, some common characteristics existed across the sample. Each participant grew up in an Appalachian community, though the size and location of their communities varied. Each participant attended the same large, public Appalachian university, graduating with a master's degree and teaching certification in English Education; however, one participant possessed some undergraduate coursework at a different college. At the time of the interview, each participant was in the last term of her/his first year of teaching or had just finished her/his first year. All participants were in their early 20s and identified as White. Four participants identified as female and one as male. This demographic make-up is representative of the students in the English Education program at the university.

The analysis of data revealed the existence of multiple tensions within rural teacher preparation program experiences. Several participants experienced shock at the difference between home community norms (i.e. place-based knowledge) and those of their peers in a relatively metropolitan-situated program. Participants expressed mixed

feelings about the ways in which rural and Appalachia were defined and situated in their coursework. While participants generally discussed the inclusion of rurality or place in their coursework, their responses indicate a perceived lack of program recognition about the diversity of place in Appalachia, and in some cases a deficit approach to the region. During early career placement in rural settings, participants negotiated use of university and community-driven knowledge with their sometimes altered perspectives of Appalachian communities to respond to student academic and social issues. Many participants, in their current teacher roles, described problems of poverty and widespread drug use in the community; however, several also focused their discussions on the positive, familial nature of their students and schools.

Different Places, Different Lenses

Despite a common broad Appalachian background, participants described their home and current teaching communities through different lenses. Brooklyn was raised in a small, mountainous rural community with a defunct coal mine about 35 minutes away from the closest town. She described the closing of the mine as a "major turning point" for her community. She spent her childhood reading, involved in 4-H, and playing baseball, but says there "really wasn't a whole lot to do." "We had the school and the volunteer fire department, and that was about it. We were very isolated." Though her community was located along a major highway, Brooklyn said "people would make comments about passing through our town without ever realizing they had been there."

She spoke of the importance of small family farms in her "forgotten area of the county" where neighbors traded pigs and chickens. She conceived of rural as "very community driven and people depending on each other in order to survive." She continued, "You need to be able to lean on your neighbor." She left her community to attend the university, about an hour away. Upon completion, she returned home to teach middle school English/language arts.

Tia grew up on a farm in an isolated rural area of Appalachia in a town of just over 600 people where "the baseball field doubled as a cow field sometimes." Tia described a childhood filled with farm work, bailing hay, cutting grain, and riding horses. In a community where most people commuted elsewhere to work, Tia's dad worked in construction and her mom worked in the community's remaining furniture factory. When asked about what rural meant to her, Tia replied, "The first thing I always think of is hay rolls and big open fields . . . I think of people who make a living farming . . . or producing something, some kind of food for others." She described rural as a place where "everybody knows everybody." Tia's home community is in transition, a consequence of urban sprawl. While she currently teaches several hours away, Tia described her teaching placement as similar to her hometown.

Karrie was raised in the largest town (approximately 24,000 people) of the five participants. Her town was once an industrial center but has experienced decades of economic decline. Though neither of her parents went to college, both worked—her dad was part-owner of a grocery store—and she described them as a "typical lower class family," Karrie told us her parents wanted to send their kids to a private, college preparatory school. She spent her youth playing softball and dancing. She said outsiders picture rural people as "hillbillies—stereotypical hillbillies. They think no teeth, no shoes, marrying your sister." She said if she had been asked what she thought of rural six or seven years ago, "I would've said no shoes, no teeth, no education. Nowadays when I think rural, I think sparse population, low socio-economic status." Karrie traveled two hours to attend the university. She currently teaches in a "blue collar, working class" Appalachian town roughly two-thirds the size of her home town.

Mary was also raised in what she considered an economically waning area, though she described her home as "in the woods." "There was a plant people worked in, and then they closed down, and a lot of people lost their jobs . . . and then a lot of other people commuted" elsewhere to work. Her dad obtained his GED, and was currently receiving disability benefits; her mom went to college and worked as a secretary for a career center. When Mary was in high school, the town's movie theater closed. Besides a big county fair, she said there was "nothing to do around our area." She described rural as "not very populated. When you say rural, I think of hay bales." She works at a technical education center in a remote area several counties away from her home community, but has taken her own students to her hometown on fieldtrips. She said, "they kept callin' it hick country."

The final participant, Ryan, also described his home community as an older industrial town. He attended a high school of fewer than 50 students. He said he lived "basically on top of a mountain. The nearest neighbor that was anywhere near my age was still over a mile away." He said because his family was relatively poor, he did a lot of reading at the library. He spent a lot of time playing in the woods with his imagination because "there weren't a lot of friends around." Ryan's childhood home is no longer standing.

> The whole thing has been razed 'cause they're gonna put in an interchange and maybe a facility of some kind. My house is gone. My childhood home is gone. All the trees around it are gone. It looks like a nuclear bomb went off there.

Now, he said, he has an "outsider perspective." He said he pictures rural as

> a pasture covered with overgrown grass . . . I tend to picture this specific cornfield that I have no idea why they planted it this way . . . just these tar and chip roads, just where I grew up . . . People living in haphazardly put together trailers. . . . It's probably not a fair assessment, but it's hard not to equate rural with poverty.

Ryan described his current teaching placement as a "mid-sized" town with clear income disparity between haves and have-nots.

These purposefully selected participants, along with their descriptions, highlight the complexity and diversity of place associated with the Appalachian experience, from communities marked by small farms and interdependency to places deemed forgotten or replaceable by outsiders and government officials. These diverse home-community experiences extended to divergent experiences in participants' college and teacher preparation program participation and influenced participants' conceptions of rurality, although, importantly, for Karrie and Ryan, those depictions shifted from early ideas about rural.

Tensions in Teacher Preparation and the College Experience

Being the rural representative. Participants reported feeling tensions between their rural community norms and their college experiences, and some adapted by taking on the role of being a representative for rural ways of life. Participants who described their home communities as remote or isolated felt that attending college in a metropolitan setting was a "culture shock." For Brooklyn, the stark contrast between self and others confirmed her identity as "a little hick girl from Forest County." This recognition spurred her interest in self-selecting into assignments and classes where rurality was discussed. Likewise, Tia was disturbed by the lack of knowledge her peers had about her agrarian upbringing. She felt responsible to act as a rural representative in her program, teaching classmates about livestock farming practices. She described an incident in one of her subject-specific teacher education classes in which the students engaged in a conversation about farming practices. Her professor challenged a student who questioned the raising of livestock for food.

> This young lady did not at all understand how you bought half of an animal, so being the farm girl that I am, who went through that lifestyle, I was like, "Well, this is how that happens, and you get up on Thanksgiving morning, and you get busy with the work that needs to be done, and it's not always pretty." She's like, "That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard in my life." I was like, "Well, you don't mind that bacon sandwich you shoved in your face this morning, do you? Somebody's gotta do it." She was very shocked at how honest I was about it. She was like, "Why would you tell anyone you did that?" I was like, "Because I'm not ever going to starve." I think it made me a better person to be from that kind of community, and to be able to talk about those kind of things that I learned in life.

Similarly, Mary recognized self-difference compared to her non-Appalachian peers. She said, "I never knew I had an accent until I went to college." She took the notion of rural representative a step further, participating in a project conducted by the university devoted to understanding difference among Appalachian areas.

Perceived portrayals of place. Though all participants graduated from the same program, they voiced a range of perspectives on its ability to prepare them for their current practice in Appalachian communities. The issue of place arose both in coursework and in student-teaching practicums. Some participants recognized the inclusion of place-based pedagogies in their teacher education coursework, while others suggested their coursework emphasized teaching within the Common Core

framework. These were often discussed in exclusive terms.

Brooklyn said professors talked about "place," how to teach students with a "rural mentality," and how to make teaching "relevant" to this population. She said she took the initiative to enroll in classes with a focus on rural teaching where "we constantly talked about place, not only from a teacher's perspective, but from a student's perspective."

> We were constantly put in that mindset of, "You're going to teach this group of kids. What are they bringing to the table that may affect you? Then, in turn, what are you bringing that can affect them and how can we make all of that work together so that everyone gets the best out of the situation?"

At the same time, she felt some of her professors equated rural with being "very country" and "backwoods." She described learning how to get "boys who hunt and fish . . . to read Shakespeare."

Karrie talked about the inclusion of rurality in her coursework in terms of social problems. She says her professors "didn't sugar coat" rural social issues that she would encounter in her practice, including drug abuse, and talked about these issues "objectively." "We learned statistics about stuff like socioeconomic status. It was very much scientific the way I went about learning about rural culture." Karrie, it appears, equated poverty and drug use with rural culture through her coursework experiences. Similarly, Mary perceived the inclusion of place in terms of broad social issues, noting that Appalachia was often "paired with poverty. That happens a lot with rural, kids paired up with poverty and the students of poverty."

Tia, in the self-assigned role of rural representative, felt the program did not explicitly address rural schools, confirming her perception of rurality as a thing ignored or misunderstood by outsiders. "I feel the college didn't set out to teach us about rural things. I felt myself as the rural individual teaching others about the rural lifestyle."

According to Ryan, "there was a lot about teaching to rural areas. I mean 'cause the assumption is that you're gonna go out to teach in the rural areas of [this state], so yes I definitely think that was addressed." Ryan discussed the emphasis on place in his experience in terms of "emphasis on relating materials to state context," particularly related to how to make the teaching of literature relevant to his rural students. "There was always a discussion based on like, 'How would you teach this in [this state],' or,

'How could you use this if they were also doing [this state's] history?' . . . That was just about ever present in most of my educational courses." While Ryan recognized his program's attention at least to the state context, he praised his program for placeless ideals, such as being "ahead of the curve in terms of dealing with the Common Core, and stuff like that, and the way practice is going at this point in time." Further, he argued the real value of his collegiate experiences came from outside the classroom in the urban environment, which, he said, "broadens your horizons." For Ryan, this new place experience significantly altered his perceptions of his home community:

> When you look at where I'm from if you're insulated, if you have those rose colored glasses on, of being where you're from. It's difficult to see the flaws 'cause no one else points them out 'cause they live there. Why would you point out the flaws of the places you live in generally?
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> Once I got to University Town maybe I went back and I'm like, "Holy God this place is dying." You know what I mean? I gained that perspective by seeing an area that's actually growing, that's on the upswing instead of the downswing. I think definitely that changed my perspective of where I'm from quite a bit.

Ryan's comments suggest, for him, the importance of experiencing different places in order to engage in thoughtful critique of the place in which one is situated, in this case, his home community.

The practicum experience. As a program requirement, all participants completed a teaching practicum. Each participant was placed at a school within 25 miles of the campus. Some participants were placed in schools classified as distant rural schools by the National Center for Education Statistics located in the university's county or a bordering county; others completed their practicum in the university's city school district.

Tia talked about the stark contrast in placements she and other members of her cohort experienced, just in that small placement radius. She was placed in a rural school, for example, and one of her friends was placed in the large urban system surrounding the University.

> Nothing that she did was every going to work for me, because they were two completely different cultures of students. . . . I don't think I could go teach at a school like University Town High School, because I wouldn't know what—I

wouldn't know which way to turn, let alone what to do. Whereas, I've always been at home in a school where everybody knew everybody, and one or two teachers had the whole class of students. I couldn't imagine having 1,200 kids in one class. That's very, very foreign to me.

Despite her discomfort, Tia said that it would have benefited her to experience a city school environment, to be "a little fish in a big pond." She said she only learned about the diversity in placements from cohort members positioned in other types of schools. She explained of her placement, as a rural native, "I was comfortable, stayed comfortable, and am still comfortable," suggesting the possible need for practicum diversity to problematize notions of place.

Most participants, however, had little to say about their practicum experiences, instead focusing their conversations on their relationships with university faculty and cohort peers and using the knowledge gained through their coursework in their current practice. In fact, most participants used positive discourse to describe their program preparation for teaching. Though Karrie also spoke positively about her teacher preparation experience, she noted,

> I don't think that anything can prepare a teacher to deal with things that they deal with to be honest with you. I don't think that there's any amount of preparation inside a classroom at least that can afford being prepared for stuff that you see when you do become a teacher. It doesn't resonate until they're your kids.

Tensions in Early Career Practice: Community-Driven Knowledge vs. Knowing as the New Outsider

Three participants shared views that suggest their upbringing created a form of community-driven knowledge that impacts their current teaching practice. While Brooklyn's self-motivated emphasis on rurality in her coursework translated to a program that "could not have prepared me better" for teaching practice, she was the only participant who returned to her home community to teach and asserted that "community knowledge" was one of her greatest assets. She described the program's success in teaching her to be a reflective teacher willing to take risks.

> I think that program definitely taught me that I'm going to fail at something every day. That's what

good teachers are. . . . They take what they don't do well and turn it into a teachable moment and make it so that the kids can learn right along with you and see that teachers aren't perfect. . . . We're all here learning together.

As a community native, she felt better able to relate to the students than some of the other new teachers in her school.

> I felt like I immediately had a connection with the kids because I knew about their community. My friend, for example, that I was referring to earlier, she's from New Jersey and she came to our school. They look at her like she is some crazy alien person who should not be in their school. I did not—fortunately, I did not have to kind of break that barrier. They knew who my parents were . . . they were so comfortable because they felt like, "Okay, this woman obviously knows something about us because she went here too and these teachers have taught her and she's clearly been okay."

Like Brooklyn, Tia's first teaching placement felt "comfortable" in its familiarity to her home community. Mary also emphasized the importance of community-based knowledge in a successful transition to teaching in a new place. Helping her adapt, Mary reported the importance of her county's teacher mentoring program and her focus on building relationships with colleagues, students, and community members, which culminated in a "love" for her new community. Mary worked to understand her students, having lacked their common experiences of hunting and fishing in her youth. "All those experiences, what they do for fun, I never did. It's interesting for them 'cause then they want me to try it. They want me to try new things, and I told them when I rode on my first side by side, and they got excited for me." Ryan described the influence of his own childhood experience on his approach to economically marginalized students: "I never wanna assume that there isn't intelligence behind someone who looks like they're of lower class. Because that happened to me . . . I know how much that hurts."

Karrie, who arguably made the greatest place transition in her placement, diverged from these community-driven perspectives. She reported trouble empathizing with her working class students. She found her work with students that "don't have good home lives" to be "emotionally draining," and said she worries about burning out early and leaving public education altogether.

While most participants used some form of community-driven, or place-conscious knowledge to support their first year of teaching, this was not the case for all participants. These divergent perspectives suggest the complexity of place perceptions in Appalachian-born teachers transitioning into and out of their university preparation programs.

Early Appalachian Classroom Experiences: New Realizations

Regardless of whether participants relied more heavily on their formal preparation or community-driven knowledge, most participants talked about the emotional toll of teaching students in Appalachian communities marked by poverty and drug use.

Brooklyn, who returned to her hometown to teach, said,

> I think that there is not enough attention put on areas like this. I think that if more people saw and experienced and realized the lives that these kids are living. I mean we have kids that literally don't know where their next meal is coming from. We have kids that we know eat once in our school on Friday, don't eat until they come back again on Monday morning. As a teacher you have to not only consider that but think how am I going to get this kid to care about learning when they don't even know where their next meal is going to come from.

These concerns about her home community differ from her childhood depictions of this place and suggest a new or nuanced conception of the same place marked by time, new experiences, and her new role as a classroom teacher.

Poverty was a common concern among participants, and they responded to it in different ways. Mary said she keeps a drawer of soap and other toiletries in her desk drawer and offers them to her students. Brooklyn posited that of the 100 kids she teaches in a day, "Maybe 10 of them are classified homeless. The majority of them are absolutely working class."

All participants talked about a drug problem in their schools. Mary, who teaches in a career and technical school, said student and parental drug use are both problems. Her school tests students for drug use in order "to simulate a workplace program." Before she moved to the area to teach, she said people warned her that the county "mating call is when you shake a pill bottle walking down the street." Brooklyn described the drug problem in her

school community as "running it into the ground" and highlighted the problem about her school's parents. "I can tell you that we have a lot of parents that come to pick their kids up and are very—zombies I guess is the only way I can describe them. They look like zombies."

Karrie's early career story was the most poignant, shedding light on the experiences of some new teachers in Appalachia. She said her teacher preparation program taught her to create a "safe classroom," and she now worries she had made her classroom "too safe" in that students are confiding problems to her on a regular basis. She told the story of her experiences two days prior to the interview:

> I had a girl come to me and tell me that her mother was put into rehab and had a boy tell me—mind you they aren't just telling me these things, they want my advice and my help... In one day I had one student tell me that her mother went into rehab, and she doesn't know what to do. I had another student come to me and tell me that he was being kicked out of his house. He was going to move away from his parents, and it was because he doesn't have a place to stay at his house. There's not a room to sleep in. He couldn't sleep on the couch, everybody was in there drinking. Then I had another student tell me that she—which one was that? I can't keep this straight. . . . I had another student tell me that her boyfriend just died overseas. Then I had one more student tell me that her dad hit her. . . . That's a typical Tuesday for me.

Karrie continued,

> In fact the day before Valentine's Day. . . . I was at the school until 7:00 p.m. with CPS [Child Protective Services] because I saw that a girl had cut herself, and I had to report it. I'm not talking just a cut . . . I reported it, and so we obviously called her mom. She started freaking out because she was institutionalized earlier this year. Her mom said that if she ever hurt herself again, "I'm gonna kill you and make it look like an accident" . . . She was scared to go home, and so we had to call CPS. . . . I sometimes wonder if I created too big of a classroom environment. Because while I'm very happy to be here for the kids I also have my own life to deal with I guess. I spend so much of my time worrying about my students that I've forgotten to take time to look at my own emotional and mental stability I guess.

These responses suggest some difficult challenges to teaching that go beyond considerations of place in

instruction. The participants in this study struggle with the practice of teaching in the context of placed problems, including poverty, violence, and widespread drug abuse.

While these early career teachers receive guidance in the form of professional development, Mary lamented the deficiency view of poverty provided in her professional development training, which differs from her education in the teacher preparation program. "The way they talked about it [in professional development sessions] is very, very atypical about poverty. It's just focused on generational poverty, how it's easier to save up for a four wheeler, to buy it, then to save up to pay off all your bills."

Discussion

Participant interviews suggest complex relationships exist between pre-service teachers' rural upbringings and their experiences with teacher preparation and its usefulness in current practices. Participants' views were shaded by their own prior understandings of rural life with some using their experiences as funds of knowledge for successful teaching and others altering their views of rurality because of their college experiences and current place contexts (see González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). These early career Appalachian teacher stories highlight an interconnectivity of place and self that is more nuanced than many place-based foci in current teacher education programs – particularly, ones that emphasize deficit understandings of rural life (i.e. poverty and related social problems) or stereotypical lifestyles ("boys who hunt and fish"). Similarly, rurality appears to be an evolving social construction for these teachers, influenced, for some, by movements into and out of various Appalachian places.

Brooklyn and Tia both described their home communities (forested and agrarian) using positive discourse, with a focus on family, community, and the familiar. They both felt prepared for the experiences of teaching in rural Appalachian schools. For Brooklyn, this preparation was a result of formal preparation and community insider knowledge, while Tia argued that she felt rurality and Appalachia were largely absent in her coursework. Ryan and Karrie both described their home communities as economically depressed former industrial areas. Though he explained several ways the program trained him to teach in ways relevant to the students

of his state, Ryan praised the placeless aspects of the program and discussed the influence of his own childhood experiences on his practice. Karrie's program depictions were likewise placeless, and she seemed the most unprepared for the social realities of her new community, creating a "safe" space she appeared unprepared to manage.

For these participants, place mattered not only in the way it was conceptualized and taught in a teacher preparation program, but in the way it was experienced first-hand by the young adults who entered the programs. These formative experiences differently influenced their experiences of the same teacher preparation program, including the ways in which they perceived rurality's inclusion in coursework, responded to peer knowledge about rurality, and learned lessons about teaching in rural spaces. Finally, these formative experiences influenced early career practice in combination with formal preparation through a teacher education program.

Two important and arguably interrelated critiques of the teacher education program include a perceived stereotyped or generalist approach to teaching about rurality or Appalachia and a deficit-focused model of understanding rural peoples and social class. These perceptions by recent graduates indicate that while the program is inclusive of discussions about place-conscious pedagogy for at least some students, there is still work to be done to take into account the rich diversity of Appalachian communities and to include examination of place-based strengths as well as challenges associated with different community types and peoples. Also, participant movements between and within different Appalachian communities, coupled with feelings of unpreparedness for diverse environments, suggests teacher preparation programs should become more cognizant and responsive to fluctuating social spaces – a point aligned with research by Lichter and Brown (2011).

Teacher education programs are in a difficult position. Their charge is to prepare the next generation of highly qualified teachers. In order to maintain accreditation, they must adhere to strict mandates regarding curriculum content and credit hours, leaving little room for the inclusion of place as a structural program component, let alone a problematized approach to place as a contested, diverse, and political concept (Nespor, 2008). The student population of teacher education programs consists of individuals often from the local area that

bring with them formed understandings of place. Our research suggests these understandings affect students' interpretations of curricula and, at times, present tensions between student understandings of place and program depictions of the concept. In rural areas, teacher preparation programs may struggle to manage remote student teaching sites due to traveling distance for supervisors, forcing programs to establish practicums in schools that are closer in proximity to the university. This, as our research suggests, limits the diversity of teaching experiences to which pre-service teachers are exposed. The voices of the participants in this study problematize rurality and place in teacher preparation. Personal understandings of rurality and varied life experiences impact classroom practices in rather complex ways, refuting simplistic notions of rural place and place-based education in teacher education curricula and practicums.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Eppley (2009) contends, " 'Rurality' as a social and cultural construct (as opposed to a bureaucratically-delineated category) implies a deep connection to place; the rural place is much more than simply a backdrop to one's life" (p. 8). For the participants of this study, identification as "rural" or "Appalachian" often meant "community-driven," "people depending on each other to survive," and interdependence with the land, but it also meant perceiving rural places as "sad and depressing" with people living in "haphazardly put together trailers" and in "unfortunate circumstances." These beliefs and personal histories are important for the transition from college to the rural teaching placement for the participants in our study. Participants with communitarian-leaning rural conceptions allowed for "immediate" connections with colleagues, familiarity with community strengths and problems, and mutual respect for students. In many ways, these communitarian-leaning teachers put into action a "critical sense of place" that Budge (2006) suggests enables people to "live better anywhere they live" (p.9). These participants, with a positive view of rural place and interest in returning to their home communities, might benefit from grow-your-own

programs like those promoted by Collins (1999) and Monk (2007). But, we would caution the need for critical interrogation of place within these programs to limit the continuance of status quo practices that contribute to community structural inequities and failures to address classism because, as several participants showed, they were unaware of the social problems within their home communities until they experienced something else.

Grow-your-own teacher candidates experience rurality in a variety of ways. The experiences of participants in our study suggest encountering outsider perceptions of Appalachia on college campuses coupled with place-based learning in teacher education programs occasionally altered conceptions of rurality. However, the quandary extends beyond incorporation of this construct of place. While appreciating that programs highlighted economically distressed communities in the region, participants believed no teacher preparation program can really prepare teachers for the diverse experiences of teaching in Appalachia or for the emotional challenges they face in the classroom given the needs of "their" students. In addition, participants highlighted unhelpful professional development opportunities and lack of support once they entered the teaching profession. A practical implication, then, of this work, is the need for extended teacher program support for early career teachers. Such distance support may increase persistence in rural, hard-to-staff schools in Appalachia.

The study also raises questions about the effectiveness of generalized notions of place in teacher education curricula and suggests pre-service teachers could be better prepared with more sophisticated understandings of rurality, perhaps through experiences with inter- and intra-Appalachian community negotiation. This study found that social stratifications, particularly involving class, are integrally linked to participant's understandings of rurality (see Nespor, 2008). Future recommendations for study include examination of the intersection of place with other identities in teacher education, to understand their contributions to teachers' perceptions and negotiations of the rural places in which they practice.

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About the Authors:

Eric D. Moffa is a visiting assistant professor of education at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. His research interests include rural education, democracy and citizenship education, global citizenship education, digital citizenship and teaching controversial issues. Eric can be contacted at moffae@wlu.edu

Erin McHenry-Sorber is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Services at West Virginia University in Morgantown, West Virginia. Her research interests include rural schools, communities and leadership, local educational politics and university-rural school/community collaboration. She can be contacted at ecmchenrysorber@mail.wvu.edu