Promising Practice Article

Connecting to Students Through Place

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Two teaching residency programs in northern California have provided some insight into graduates' preparation for, and inclination to pursue, teaching in a rural school. Both programs include early coursework that addresses the needs and strengths of rural communities and requires candidates to conduct an in-depth study of their placement community. This article specifically describes features of the community study assignment that aims to have preservice teachers examine their understandings about rural places, to create a connection to the place where students live, and to promote place-based pedagogy. Student feedback suggests the assignment is a promising practice for teacher preparation. A rural-focused curriculum and a strong understanding of the community creates conditions that support both the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools.

Much has been written about teacher shortages impacting the United States now and in the near future, and these shortages are especially felt in the rural areas of the country (Fong, Makkonen, & Jaquet, 2016). Many teacher preparation programs have concentrated on ways to address these impending teacher shortages, and some of these programs have focused on the importance of preparing teachers specifically to "go rural" (e.g. Trinidad et al. 2014, Azano & Stewart, 2015). The Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) program for elementary teachers (2010-2015) and the subsequent Residency in Secondary Education (RiSE) program for secondary teachers (2015-2019) at California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico) sought to deliver teacher preparation with research-based features (e.g. Hammer et al., 2005) to more successfully recruit and retain teachers in harder to staff contexts. The programs are each a one-year residency where candidates co-taught with a mentor teacher in high-need rural partner school districts in the far northern and relatively sparsely populated part of California. Although some may associate the state of California with palm trees and beaches, the northern Sacramento Valley is covered in rice fields, fruit and nut orchards, and is surrounded by eight national forests.

The Residency Program Design

CSU, Chico's residency programs, both funded by federal government Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grants, are unique in that few programs across the country are designed specifically for a rural context. Because of the grant funding, program participants were provided a loan for living expenses during the highly intensive residency year, which was forgiven if they worked in a high-need district for three years upon completion of the program. Because the research literature (e.g. Reininger, 2012) suggests that teacher education graduates often choose to live near their hometown, the residency programs attempted to recruit program participants from CSU, Chico's 33,000 square-mile service region. There was also an expectation that program graduates who were not predisposed to teaching in rural contexts might choose to teach in rural places as a result of their experience in the residency program.

A key component of the CSU, Chico residency programs is a yearlong placement in one classroom with a mentor teacher using co-planning and co-teaching strategies (Friend, 2007), which differed from the traditional placements where candidates typically change classrooms after one semester. After completing the credential requirements that included Master's level coursework and classroom action research (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1993; see also Schulte & Halpern-Klipfel, 2015), graduates have earned a Master's degree in Education and met the state requirements for a teaching credential.

Two years after the RTR program ended, program faculty collected both quantitative and qualitative data on the impacts of the features of the RTR program on graduates' preparation. Findings indicated that the RTR program prepared graduates with a high sense of self-efficacy, more than half of whom were committed to teaching in rural places (Schulte & Justeson, in press). Of those who were committed to teaching rurally, approximately 25% indicated that their experiences in the rural teaching program may have influenced their decision to seek

rural jobs when they previously had not intended to. Program assessment of RiSE is underway. What follows is a detailed description of one practice from both of the residency programs that led to stronger understandings of rural communities and created conditions that support both the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools.

Developing a Sense of Place Through the Community Study

There is a plethora of teacher education programs to prepare urban teachers, but very few that address the needs of rural contexts (Schafft, 2016). The CSU, Chico residency programs were designed with a goal to prepare more teachers for rural schools and therefore course readings and assignments addressed research and theories about rural education, which was a departure from the typical teacher preparation program at CSU, Chico. One RTR graduate noted, "The teachers that I teach with now are surprised that I went into a credential program that focused on rural schools."

Teaching residents complete their first course in the program in June, before their fall classroom placement. Many of the course readings for that course, *Critical Perspectives in Education,* are centered on theories of place and youth in rural communities. The class members are assigned, in part, articles about place-based education (Azano & Stewart, 2015), critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2008), social capital in rural places (Budge, 2006), the purpose of public education in rural communities (Edmondson & Butler, 2010), and strengths-based pedagogy (Gardner & Troope, 2011; Callingham, 2013).

The major assignment in the summer class is a community study of the rural town where they are assigned to conduct their residency (see Appendix). Candidates complete the group assignment with their cohort members who are placed at the same school. The group is required to make at least two different visits to the community, walking the area nearest to their schools, creating a map designating resources in the community, and researching information about local attributes. Candidates are asked to focus on the assets and strengths of the surrounding community and are encouraged to meet some local citizens. Some of the candidates walk up to people they see on the street, others strike up conversations with clerks at a store, still others arrange interviews with local officials. Graduates have reported that the benefits of conducting the community study stayed with them throughout the school year, especially if the process challenged their assumptions about a place. When the young people have referenced local places and events, the candidates are able to identify with that. The inspiring conversations with community members echo in their minds when they are challenged to stay hopeful in the face of adverse situations. When students are in need of resources outside of school, the candidates knew where to start. On occasion, their knowledge was more current than their mentor teacher's.

The community study assignment has three objectives: to challenge and/or inform previous understandings about rural places, to create a connection to the place where their future students live, and to lay the groundwork for place-based pedagogy. Gruenewald (2003) suggests place-conscious pedagogy enhances rural schools because learning becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers, and accountability is reconceptualized so that places matter to educators, students, and citizens in tangible ways . . . furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there. (p. 620)

Preconceived Notions

One purpose of the community study is to inform and/or challenge any preconceived ideas the candidates might have had about this rural place, and about rural places in general. Theobald and Wood (2010) explain that negative constructions of rurality go as far back as seventeenth-century Europe and have proliferated with globalization and mass media. Sharplin (2002) describes the binary discourse of preservice teachers with respect to expectations of teaching in rural and remote areas. Her research found that pre-service teachers "rely on narrow stereotypes of rural and remote teaching. They hold, sometimes simultaneously, images of rural and remote teaching as an idyllic retreat and outback hell" (Implications, para 7). Azano (2014) explains how this reduction of a place to preconceived judgments by outsiders is a recurrent experience for rural communities, "allowing pejoratives and negative stereotypes to persist in our social consciousness despite a climate of public correctness" (p. 61).

The community visits and the subsequent class discussions were focused on acknowledging that all of perspectives are partial. Sometimes, a deficit narrative was challenged by a community member. One example is when an RTR candidate returned from their group visit and told a story about the limited number of commercial buildings in the community. Martin noted there was "just a liquor store on the corner," but he continued with an explanation of how his judgment about the place was challenged by the storeowner. "I mean, it was (air quotes) a 'mini-mart.' The owner pointed out to me that they were one of a few places in the area that sold food, and so they did more than just sell liquor." Several candidates decried the unkempt yards as signs of moral decline. However, as we explored various reasons why lawns might be left under-landscaped, it created an opportunity for the class to reflect on the power of perception and the connotation in certain ways of seeing. One conversation with a community member revealed that when the local citizens did clean up their neighborhood, the property values rose and so did the rent, causing some folks to have to move. These classroom conversations caused candidates to interrogate how their own lived experiences shaped their views of, in this case rural, communities.

Corbett (2016) has noted one classic problem in rural education research has been an insensitivity to differences across contexts; "as the old saying goes, if you have seen one rural community, you have seen . . . well, one rural community" (p. 278). The residency program participants also reported learning about a more complex definition of rural as they studied the different communities in which they would teach. For those coming from urban contexts, the variety among small towns was illuminating. And, having grown up rural didn't necessarily prepare candidates for the rural communities in which they were placed. One RTR graduate said

> I think I came very quickly to understand that there are different types of rural experiences. I grew up in a very small rural farming community. We didn't have a stoplight; everybody went and hung out at the store on the corner after school. My experiences are that nobody in my community struggled with money issues, we didn't have the poverty …you're walking into that rural different perspective or different lens; it was eye opening.

For those who identified as rural, learning about a new rural place created some opportunities for bonding while also recognizing that each context matters. For many graduates, this key understanding was an important take-away. Many of them have reported that they now do their own community study prior to interviewing for a job so that they can speak specifically to that community's assets, and not about what they think about all rural kids.

Connection to Place

The community study assignment is also intended to inform candidates about the community in which their students live so that they can better understand who their students are.

"Places make us: as occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 621). Learning about the community encourages the teacher candidates to begin to attach themselves to a place where they would seek a sense of "inhabitance." Orr (2013) defines that concept when he writes, "Good inhabitance is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness" (p. 187). This type of careful observation and connection to a place is an important part of place-conscious pedagogy. One graduate reflected on the impact the community study had on her view of her students:

> Through the course of the community study project, I was able to adjust my lens and begin to see the beauty, benefits, and diversity in the town that I had previously been so quick to judge. My perspective shifted so that I was able to begin the school year with an attitude of openness towards my students and their families, no longer seeing them as an "other" to be pitied or judged. (A. Ott, personal communication, April 29, 2018)

Another graduate reports that she used her knowledge of the community to make informed decisions about how to respond to student behavior and how to approach certain types of topics in her English class. "For example, our findings suggested that [our] students might be more on the conservative side of topics, and religious roots and values were apparent. Knowing this, I tried to find points of contact that would help students keep an open mind toward topics like stereotyping, sexism, racism, and social justice topics" (K. Enns, personal communication, 4/30/18). Another RiSE graduate noted, "I feel like I come back to the community study often. It helps me interpret everyday issues when I take the time to reflect upon the community

context" (S. Wohletz, personal communication, 5/1/18).

Place-based Curriculum

Throughout their yearlong placement, teacher candidates are encouraged to engage with activities outside of the school community and to connect their curriculum to their place so that they might nurture connectedness with their students. The expectation is that having grown familiar with the community before starting their teaching residency, the candidates will use what they know to better understand their students and to create place-based learning. In their summer classes, all of the students propose creative ideas to capitalize on the strengths and resources of their placement community to enhance their teaching. Candidates propose units that engage students in testing water quality in the Sacramento Rivier or inspire students to write about economic and racial inequities in their communities. At the end of the program, most candidates were able to connect more closely with their students as a result of what they learned in their community study, but only a small percentage were able to actually enact their place-based curriculum. Unfortunately, a common theme as to why residents weren't able to do more place-based learning during their residency was that mentor teachers had fairly standard or established curriculum, and that often didn't make room for new approaches or engaged learning outside of the classroom.

In one notable case, a RiSE program candidate designed his entire action research study to help him understand his students' sense of place. The next section is a closer look at how that resident implemented an action research study in his high school biology classroom to examine how his students connected to their community, and how he might use that information to make his curriculum more relevant and engaging. The description of the classroom research serves to further illustrate the three goals of the community study assignment: to challenge preservice teachers' narratives about rural places, to create a connection to the place where their students live, and to imagine opportunities for place-based pedagogy.

The Power of Place: One Resident's Study

It is necessary to address the narratives that teaching candidates have about rural places, even when they might have come from those places. Austin grew up and attended the high school where he was placed for his residency in teaching biology (a pseudonym is used). This opportunity for insider/outsider perspective intrigued him and so he used his action research to better understand how his students connect to the place where he also grew up. In his final paper, Austin wrote,

> I feel my rural upbringing is central to who I am. Throughout my childhood and adolescent years I spent much time outdoors, exploring the rich diversity of recreational opportunities Lakeville offered… it cultivated in me a deep sense of place for my hometown, its people and its natural features. (Roughton, 2017, p. 7)

Although Austin very much enjoyed his childhood, he struggled with the idea of returning to his hometown for his student teaching. During the interviews for the community study, he found people who had wonderful things to say about his home community, but all of them mentioned a persistent image problem:

> Having a local connection to and personal insight into Lakeville, one issue above others stood out to me as it related to my students – the negative image of Lakeville as a poor, drug-ridden, rural community that has been propagated by locals and citizens of Butte County alike for many years… This image problem is something that has both intrigued and perturbed me throughout my life, as I too have been one of the locals who have felt the need to defend my place of residence when others cast a downward eye towards it. (p. 8)

It was an interview with the tourism director at the local Chamber of Commerce that ultimately inspired Austin to pursue a study about his students' sense of place. She described local teens as being generally apathetic about the community. "With this issue in mind, I identified one of my roles as an educator at [our high school] to be to help students move past Lakeville's negative label and instead develop a more positive sense of place" (p. 9). Austin drew on the current research literature about place-based learning and constructed units on ecology and biodiversity that related specifically to the local environment. As one form of data, Austin assessed his students' sense of place using a pre- and post-survey intended to measure a person's place attachment.

Instruction of the second unit on biodiversity was unexpectedly interrupted by an environmental

crisis. Heavy rain in late February caused massive amounts of water to be released from the Lakeville Dam Spillway. Such an intense release of water damaged portions of the spillway which began to show signs of potential failure which, if to happen, would severely flood a three-county area, including the homes of most of the students in Austin's biology classes. The Governor declared a state of emergency and ordered more than 180,000 community members to immediately evacuate. Formal and informal evacuation centers in nearby towns on higher ground, including the university community, took in thousands of people, most of whom left their homes with only their clothes on their backs. After two days of mandatory evacuation, authorities downgraded to evacuation warnings which were in place for more than a month more. Residents were asked to be prepared to evacuate at a moment's notice. Schools reopened two weeks after the mandatory evacuation, while still under evacuation warnings.

After returning to school, Austin and his mentor teacher provided several opportunities for their students to process their emotions around the emergency evacuation. Austin knew that this near catastrophic event was bound to impact his students' sense of place. Not surprisingly, the earlier references students had make to the benefits of natural amenities nearby, turned to anxiety about a failing dam in post-survey responses. However, this community crisis engaged students in talking about the community resources in ways they had never done previously. Austin found that students' awareness of their predicament in a flood plain was heightened, but as a result they were able to discuss ways to educate the broader community about the repairs needed at the dam and potential approaches for the community to come together to address the concerns.

The CSU, Chico residency programs sought to instill strengths-based perspectives about students and a view of rural places that acknowledges realities, but also includes hope and opportunity. Austin's personal bucolic memories of growing up in the natural environment had originally overshadowed many of the negative qualities that many of his students had experienced. He found that learning about his students' sense of place allowed him to better understand his students and form stronger connections with them as a result. Austin concluded that "place-based learning cannot be fully accomplished without first understanding students' relationship to their community. This study taught me how to be a more responsive teacher by demonstrating the power of seeking to understand the lived experiences of my students" (p. 33). By seeking out the perspectives of students and incorporating relevant, local examples into his curriculum, Austin was able to better serve the needs of his students.

Conclusion

For far too long, the majority of CSU, Chico credential candidates have been placed in schools in neighboring communities where they drive to and from for several weeks without ever venturing beyond the school parking lot. For most of these future teachers, the communities where their students live have remained a blind spot in their rearview mirrors. Because of the successes in the residency programs, School of Education faculty hope to integrate the community study assignment throughout the traditional credential pathways, however some challenges exist.

The community study assignment historically has been offered only as part of the RTR and RiSE programs because of the extended twelve-month schedule, which begins the summer before the school year. Current traditional credential programs are offered within two semesters and are heavily weighted with state-required teacher performance expectations and assessments, and clinical supervisors are assigned increasingly larger number of student teachers to observe. Despite these obstacles, pathway coordinators have committed to explore an abbreviated version of the community study assignment with a goal of focused and explicit interactions with community members who are outside of the school. When they are at the placement schools for their required seminar groups, the university supervisors will lead a discussion similar to the one described in the assignment. This program revision aligns with ongoing efforts to scale up the yearlong residency model within the traditional credential programs.

Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, and Kline (2015) theorize that the preparation of teachers for rural schools is directly influenced by "an individual's conceptions and experiences of rurality" (p. 81). It is therefore critical that all teachers, regardless of their life experiences, learn about the contexts in which they teach, challenge their judgments, and seek out the strengths of a place so that they can see their students in all of their complexity. Engaging preservice teachers in focused study about and within the community in which they will teach is one way to

implement place-conscious teacher education. Through a heightened self-awareness of their place, teachers are more likely to use this information to connect with their students and develop strengths-based views of rural communities. However, this assignment benefits teachers in any community. As one graduate noted in a focus group, "…what you just said is that we're going to face these problems no matter where we go. It's going to be in urban schools, and it's going to be in rural schools, it's going to be anywhere."

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Appendix: School and Community Study

1. Researching Your School and District

- What is your school's mission, demographics, facilities, etc.?
- What local agencies or organizations provide services for the school/district?
- What programs do the school/district provide to serve ELL, SPED, gender non-conforming, students who are experiencing homelessness, or other students with specific schooling needs?

2. Community Map and Discussion

"A theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human-world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 624). Go to your school and conduct a community walk. Draft a rough map of the neighborhood of the school (5-8 block radius). What qualities contribute to a "sense of place" (Wilson, 1997, p. 191).

- Housing – what types of housing?
- Public Transportation: How accessible is the neighborhood?
- Community Resources (e.g., stores, businesses, organizations, faith centers, clubs, museums, community centers, hospitals, libraries)
- Recreation/Open space and parks: Are there trees, yards, public spaces in which to walk and sit? Are there opportunities for seclusion/quiet? For exploring?
- Opportunities for diversity? (e.g. language, culture, environment, ideas?)
- Opportunities to effect change?

3. Meet Community Members

You are provided multiple days to visit the community under study. "Where in a community, for example, might students and teachers witness and develop forms of empathetic connection with other human beings? How might these connections lead to exploration, inquiry, and social action?" (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 316).

During your group's community visit, take time to interact with locals e.g. at a local cafe, in a park, or at the library. Introduce yourself, ask them about their community, ask what would they want new teachers to know about that place. Other potential questions:

- How is your community perceived? (both by locals and by outsiders)
- How are youth engaged in your community? What programs encourage that engagement? (clubs, programs, etc.)
- What makes an ideal community?
- What qualities about your community contribute to a good quality of life? (e.g. recreation, arts, entertainment, worship, etc.)
- What might your community do to attract new teachers?
- If someone asked you if they should move here, what would you tell them about his community?

4. Synthesize and Discuss Community Information

Synthesize the data you collected about the school and community and discuss with your peers and your supervisor. Based on your map, discuss the strengths and challenges presented by the school's neighborhood.

- How is it we construct a neighborhood as "good" or a "bad"? How do we come to value this?
- What aspects of a neighborhood are most important and to whom?
- What aspects did you notice that may not be included on this list?
- How are/might "nourishing habitats" be cultivated in this place? (Wilson, 1997, p. 191)
- How can you imagine students might personalize this place? What type of place-based learning might occur here?
- What is your overall initial impression about this place? What is the role of the school(s) in the community? How does this compare to what you thought previously?
- How does this information impact the ways you think about working in this community?
- Where do you think the "heartbeat" of the community is and what makes you think that?
- What questions do you have or will you pursue as a result of what you have learned?
- How does this information inform your purpose for teaching?

"From the perspective of democratic education, schools must provide opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in the process of place making, that is, in the process of shaping what our places will become" (Gruenewald 2003, p. 627).