

Envisioning the Rural Practicum: A Means to Positively Affect Recruitment and Retention in Rural Schools

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Recruitment and retention of teachers in rural areas continue to dominate educational narratives across the country. School districts, state agencies, and university schools of education have instituted strategies including financial incentives, alternative standards and licensure criteria, and grow-your-own programs that target underemployed locals and paraprofessionals for accelerated licensure. While each strategy may enjoy situational success, none is a panacea for all circumstances. However, there is growing interest in the development of university and school district partnerships in creating innovative solutions to rural recruitment and retention issues. This study investigates the efficacy of a partnership between several small rural districts and a state university partnering to create and test a contextualized clinical practice model. The Montana State University rural practicum placed 13 preservice teachers in a week-long, immersive clinical practice in rural, remote schools in Montana, for them to authentically experience the rural context and for researchers to determine if such an experience might positively affect recruitment and retention efforts. The study used a community-based participatory research method to ensure equal participation of both university and rural school partners in co-creating the experience and in collecting and analyzing data. Results suggest that the rural practicum experience positively affected preservice teacher perceptions of rural teaching and rural communities. Rural school leaders and university personnel also agreed that the model held promise for recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas.

Keywords: recruitment and retention of teachers, clinical practice, rural practicum, rural education

Recruitment and retention of teachers across the United States have the potential to hit a crisis point (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). The factors creating educator shortages are many, including decreased numbers of students in educator preparation programs and high levels of attrition not caused by expected retirements. The issue is even worse in high-poverty, high-needs schools, many in rural areas

(Showalter, Klein, Johnson, & Hartman, 2017). In the state of Montana, with a population density of 6.8 people per square mile, 96% of districts are considered rural, and most experience recruitment issues (Montana University System [MUS] Rural Educator Task Force [RERTF], 2017). In 2017, 83% of all teaching positions were located in small rural schools, yet 90% of preservice teachers had no clinical teaching experiences in rural school

settings during their preparation programs (MUS RERTF, 2017). If we want to recruit teachers for high-needs schools, especially in rural remote locations, it seems reasonable that exposing them to those rural teaching experiences would be a good first step.

To help mitigate teacher recruitment and retention in Montana, a university education team, together with rural school partners, created an immersive practicum experience to help university students gain a better understanding of the unique opportunities and challenges inherent in teaching in small, rural communities. This partnership challenged structures within a traditional undergraduate education program to promote collegial and action-oriented processes whereby education leadership faculty, teacher education faculty, and field placement officials worked together to develop and supervise an immersive field experience in remote, rural schools. University students gained opportunities to practice pedagogy, build relationships with local educators and students, and develop a student-led professional learning community. University faculty used the experience to strengthen relationships with rural school leaders, teachers, and community members in an effort to better understand and address the teacher recruitment issues experienced in rural areas, and to examine the potential that relational leadership structures could have in furthering rural school/community and university partnerships.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is based on situated communities of practice and relational leadership. Lave and Wenger (1991), seminal theorists of situated learning, postulate that the participation in a community of practice has profound impacts on the outcomes of learning. Situated learning within teacher preparation is grounded in social participation in the school community (Korthagen, 2010). The intersectionality of thinking, doing, and reflecting provides for development of authentic reimagining of the understandings of teaching and learning. Based in the work of John Dewey (1938) and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theories of social constructivism, situated communities of practice provide opportunity for the

“reconstruction of experience which adds to the meaning of the experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1966, p. 76).

Immersion into the classroom, school, and community contexts is a foundational experience for future teachers within their teacher preparation program. The experiential contextualized connections they make between learning theories and pedagogical practices taught at the university provide the basis for their future work as educational professionals (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Developing situated communities of practice is not simply about the preservice teachers but instead encompasses the other agents involved, including mentor teachers, administrators, and field supervisors from the university—all are critical members, both for teaching and for learning (Will-Dubyak, 2016). Immersion experience by all members has the potential to change understandings of the development of teaching practices, teacher growth, and collaboration. Korthagen (2010) specifically argues that

this points towards the need for many opportunities of peer supported learning in teacher education, which also prepares teachers for the kind of professional development that is much more grounded in collaboration and exchange with colleagues than is common in many schools. It implies an emphasis on the co-creation of educational and pedagogical meanings within professional communities of teachers-as-learners, as also proposed by Simons et al. (2003). When teacher educators start to see cohort groups in teacher education as such communities, and treat them as such, this in itself may have an important positive influence on their practices in schools. (p. 101)

Since no formal structure existed to envision and develop our rural practicum as a situated community of practice, a series of relational processes were employed to accomplish the outcomes of this research. The evolution of leadership that made our collaborative work possible is best explained by Uhl-Bien's (2006) relational leadership theory. In relational leadership,

there is no single position of leadership or power; rather, leadership emerges and is exercised through the “network of relationships between and among individuals” (Balkindi & Kilduff, 2005, p. 942) for a common purpose. Relational leadership emphasizes a collaborative orientation and an inclusive culture that welcomes diverse perspectives and viewpoints. Group members are empowered to apply their individual skill sets and expertise to the completion of the goal and the efficacy of the group itself (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998).

In this research, relational leadership provided a foundational structure to encourage situated communities of practice (made up of mentor teachers, school administrators, field supervisors, and university faculty), providing preservice teachers opportunities to experience the intersectionality of thinking, doing, and, reflecting (theory to practice). Our end goal was to better understand how to utilize the rural context in the

development of teaching practices, teacher growth, and collaboration (Figure 1).

Given the importance of situated communities of practice and relational leadership to this study, we argue that an effective way to explore fruitful solutions to the problem of recruitment/retention is based on the emergence and development of partnerships between and among university personnel and rural educators. Adopting a community structure to co-create authentic clinical practice opportunities in rural, remote schools and communities reimagines the rural context as a fertile professional learning environment rather than a clinical placement conundrum.

Review of Related Literature

Recruitment and Retention in Remote Rural Locales

Research indicates an ongoing and persistent problem in recruiting and retaining educators for

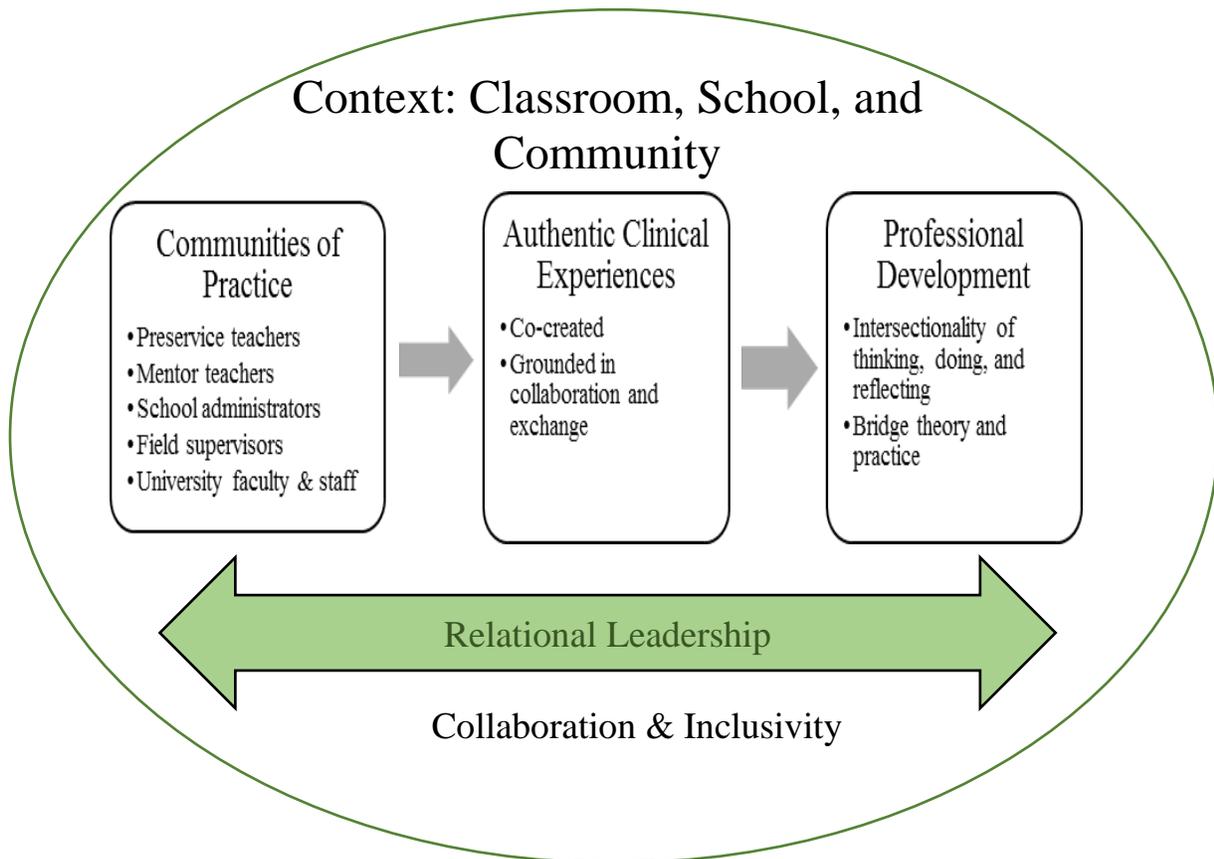


Figure 1. Theoretical framework: relational leadership/communities of practice

America's small, rural schools (Jimerson, 2004; Latterman & Steffes, 2017). There are numerous reasons for this educator shortage, among them inadequate funding for competitive salaries; geographical and social isolation issues, especially in remote rural areas; and fewer students enrolled in educator preparation programs (American Association for Employment in Education, 2010; Jimerson, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Some states have sought to address the teacher shortage by instituting grow-your-own programs for both teachers and school leaders, wherein rural districts target underemployed locals with bachelor's degrees in related areas, paraprofessionals working in their schools, and even high school students themselves for contextualized training to gain a teaching license (Brown, 2018).

Montana, where this study was conducted, has more than 200 frontier schools, categorized as having 200 or fewer students within an attendant community and located in a county with five or fewer people per square mile (Morton & Harmon, 2011). It is not uncommon for these schools to get few if any applicants for teaching positions, prompting administrators to apply for emergency licensure waivers for teachers lacking qualifications for licensure (Hoffman, 2019). Other rural districts have recruited teachers from the Philippines to provide staffing for both elementary and secondary classrooms (Hoffman, 2019). As important as both emergency licensure and foreign recruitment may be to Montana's current educator shortage, neither alternative promises long-term solutions. The Education Commission of the States (2016) found teacher recruitment and retention especially problematic in predominantly rural states, even though many had begun to address the issue in three primary ways: through financial incentives from state legislatures, individual school and district recruitment policies, and university-district partnerships. One of the larger efforts to build university/district partnerships comes from the U.S. Department of Education's Teacher Quality Partnership grant program, which incentivizes partnerships between teacher preparation programs and high needs rural districts (Aragon & Wixom, 2016). Some recent program grantees

promote recruitment through targeted interventions that promote preservice clinical field experiences and student teaching in rural contexts.

Importance of Clinical Practice and Partnerships

Paralleling the need for practices that increase recruitment and retention, researchers also suggest educator preparation programs provide intensive and effective clinical field experiences that enable teachers to gain guided practice and experiences in the authentic contexts of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Roberts (2005) noted that teacher education programs need to provide opportunities for preservice teachers to experience teaching within rural contexts to build awareness to the possibilities, in the same way a program might do so for urban schools. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2015) also designated one of its five standards to the importance of clinical practice. It states: "Because the actual process of learning to teach requires sustained and ongoing opportunities to engage in authentic performance in diverse learning environments, clinical practice is a valuable, necessary, and fundamentally non-negotiable component of high-quality teacher preparation" (p. 14).

Clinical Practice in Rural Schools

A report of the Clinical Practice Commission of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2018) asserted that effective clinical practice designs address both the learning needs of students PK-12 and the unique needs of the instructional context. White and Kline (2012) also advocate for preservice teachers to gain understanding and experience in the unique attributes of rural schools and the communities they serve, although few university teacher preparation programs accomplish these goals. Despite the lack of rurally focused teacher education programming, Kline, White, and Lock (2013) acknowledge that rural practicum experiences are wholly beneficial to engaging preservice teachers in authentic clinical practice that is both instructional and contextual and that rural practica provide a lens through which to understand living and working in rural communities.

Finally, Hudson and Hudson (2008) found that during an immersive experience in a rural context, preservice teachers experienced “very significant attitudinal changes” in their “willingness to teach in rural areas, which also dispelled misconceptions about rural living and teaching” (p. 74).

Purpose and Context for the Study

In 2016, the Montana University System (MUS) Rural Educator Recruitment and Retention Task Force (RERRTF) was formed to address the needs of rural schools in securing highly qualified teachers for rural areas. Data from the group suggested that units within the MUS were producing enough teacher education candidates to fill most of the teaching vacancies in the state—with some universal exceptions, such as special education—but students were not considering employment in rural schools, especially those in remote regions located more than an hour away from larger communities and towns (MUS RERRTF, 2017). Additionally, the three largest teacher education programs all are housed in university towns with populations of over 40,000 people: Bozeman, Missoula, and Billings. Each of the K-12 school districts in those university communities has been the primary partner for clinical practice opportunities for sophomore-level early field experience, junior practicum, and senior student teaching. In fact, even though Montana has the highest percentage of rural, remote school districts in the nation, over 75% of all clinical practice opportunities in MUS teacher preparation programs occurred less than 30 minutes away from campus (MUS RERRTF, 2017 Showalter et al., 2017). The lack of authentic, rural clinical practice and the absence of knowledge about living and working in rural communities made it difficult for many new teacher graduates to even try to imagine seeking a teaching position in rural areas (MUS RERRTF, 2017).

Providing students with authentic clinical practice and lived experiences in rural settings, while enjoying an opportunity to grow professionally with a peer cohort, was the primary purpose for establishing the Montana State University rural practicum pilot program and conducting this research. Through the application of relational leadership theory, we also sought to develop and

deepen existing relationships among university faculty, staff, and rural school educators. Moreover, as we leveraged professional and contextual expertise to design a collaborative, sustainable process to create rural clinical practice opportunities, we sought to assess the model’s viability in positively influencing rural recruitment and retention.

Methods

We used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) design to fully integrate the perspectives and experiences of all research investigators and participants as equal partners in the research process (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Paralleling the CBPR design was our interest in the theory of relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006) and the potential both the CBPR research design and the process orientation of relational leadership theory had for increasing participant engagement and leveraging participants’ contextual expertise for co-constructing an authentic rural, clinical field experience. One strength of a relational leadership orientation is the reduction of perceived power differentials between researcher and participant, thereby encouraging the development of coequal relationships between and within groups of people. These flatter leadership structures increase the likelihood that partnerships can survive as an influential partner moves on. Additionally, CBPR’s intentional engagement of the community elicits multiple perspectives and divergent analytical lenses through which data can be understood more deeply. For clinical field experiences to be sustainable and mutually beneficial for all, it is essential that the variables reflect the needs of partners. Gutiérrez (2008) and Zeichner (2010) termed this *third space*, where the PK-12 school leaders and teacher preparation faculty intersect, bringing practitioner and academic knowledge to the place of creation of experiences within the partnership.

Perceptions from university faculty, rural leaders, and practicum students were gathered before, during, and after the clinical practicum experience to examine the rural practicum’s potential to authentically prepare students for

working in rural schools and as an effective recruitment and retention strategy.

Research Questions

We sought answers to three research questions in this study:

1. What are the perceptions of preservice teachers engaged in an immersive practicum in small rural schools before, during, and after the experience?
2. What are the perceptions of university faculty and rural educators about the potential of the rural practicum model to help preservice teachers better understand the rural context?
3. What are the perceptions of university faculty and rural educators about the potential of the rural practicum model as a viable strategy to help address recruitment and retention in rural schools?

Rural Site and Partner Selection

Over 90% of clinical placements in Montana occurred within 30 minutes' driving distance of university teacher education programs and were not likely representative of the rural nature of the state (MUS RERRTF, 2017). Therefore, we intentionally chose to develop clinical practice settings that were more authentic to remote rural locales in Montana. We chose northeastern Montana's Bakken oil shale area because it was far from our campus (435 miles) and presented a very stark contrast to the more urban/suburban kind of lifestyle many of the participating practicum students had previously experienced. We also had long established personal and professional relationships with several of the area's school leaders who had earned their administrative licensure at our university. Those former graduates were the first points of contact between the university and other area schools and communities. Their knowledge of rurality and rural education and their relationships with other school leaders in the region were hinge points for many of the logistical details (school placements, housing, and travel) necessary to the success of the experience. With the advice and facilitation of these rural school leaders, we were able to envision and

create immersive week-long placements for 13 practicum students in six, rural school districts in the region. Five of the six school districts had less than 170 students K-12; the remaining district had a population of 1,300 students K-12.

Pilot Study Description

Activities Before Practicum Experience. In the early spring of 2017, Montana State University advising center staff and education faculty made presentations to three instructional methods classes about the rural practicum opportunity. Thirteen junior secondary practicum students volunteered for the experience. Prior to the week-long immersive experience, students gathered with university faculty to discuss travel logistics of the experience and the academic expectations. Faculty adapted the existing practicum course format to align with the condensed, rural focus while ensuring all requirements for instructional hours and licensure were still fulfilled. Participants attended special topic and practicum instructional sessions in the weeks leading up to their rural experience to prepare for lesson planning, observing teaching and reflection activities. Student participants also reached out to their rural cooperating teachers (CTs) to introduce themselves and gain insights about the schools and communities where they would be working.

Activities During Practicum Experience. During the week-long experience, pairs of students commuted to their respective schools daily and spent approximately nine hours/day immersed in teaching lessons, observing other classrooms, and experiencing the culture of a small rural school. University practicum supervisors also traveled to the schools daily to observe practicum students teaching and to interact with rural teachers and administrators. Students and supervisors returned to our home-base hotel each evening for a group dinner and nightly debriefing sessions. The debriefing sessions also served as data collection structures for focus groups and reflection questionnaire completion. Following debriefing sessions, students worked together to plan and organize lessons and materials for the following day of teaching.

To make this experience affordable for students, we secured an internal grant from our

college that paid for transportation, evening meals, and hotel stays for students and supervisor. We also paid students a small stipend to participate in the rural practicum. During the initial phase of this project we learned that eight of the students worked 20–30 hours/week, paying their way through college. Missing a week of work to participate in the rural practicum experience had financial implications for students that we wanted to mitigate with the stipend for participation.

Activities Following Practicum Experience.

Following their rural placements, participants attended several additional instructional sessions to complete the program's curricular requirements and signature assignments common to all participating in any practicum experience. We also wanted to provide time for participants to process their experiences and document feedback for us to use for future program implementation. Students were encouraged to share their understanding and views about rural schools and communities, reflecting on their beliefs prior to the experience and at its conclusion.

Participants

Participant Group I. Seven of the participants were female and six were male, ranging in age from 21–29 years. Only 3 of the 13 participants had backgrounds from rural areas in neighboring states or larger communities in Montana; the remaining 10 participants hailed from urban and suburban areas, such as Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Toledo, Ohio.

Participant Group II. Group II had 12 participants. Six were rural school leaders, five of whom were graduates of our university's educational leadership program. They ranged in age from 29–62 years, with school leader experience ranging from 1–25 years. The six additional Group II participants were four university faculty members who observed the practicum students in their rural school placement and met with administrators and CTs from every school site, and the university's two directors of education advising and field placement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research Question 1. Research question 1, which asked Group I participants (practicum students) about their perceptions of teaching in a rural school context, was answered through document review of student reflections and three focus groups attended by all 13 student participants. Document review consisted of a four-question, open-ended questionnaire that was given during the immersive practicum experience. The questionnaire asked about their general impressions of rural schools before, during, and after the experience, the advantages and disadvantages to teaching and living in rural communities, and how the experience had affected their views as future teachers. The focus groups convened over three separate evenings: one on campus before the experience, one during the week of the experience, and the last on campus after the experience.

Data analysis first consisted of open coding students' responses to the open-ended questionnaires. Those initial responses were used as the basis for focus group questions that allowed us deeper investigation during the focus group sessions. After the focus group data were analyzed through open coding, we then employed axial coding to identify the relationships between all open-coded material. The axial codes revealed the emerging core themes from practicum participant responses.

Research questions 2 and 3. Research question 2 asked Group II participants (rural school leaders and university faculty and staff) about the potential of the rural practicum experience to more fully prepare students for working in rural schools. Research question 3 asked about the feasibility of the rural practicum model as a strategy to address rural teacher recruitment and retention. Both questions were answered through semi structured individual interviews of all school leaders at the conclusion of the rural practicum experience. All interviews were electronically recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Transcriptions were sent to each school leader as a member check. Upon verification of interview transcripts, data were then open-coded into concepts and categories, which created themes.

We also conducted a focus group with the six participating university faculty and staff on campus 2 weeks after the rural practicum concluded. The focus group was recorded electronically, and transcriptions were provided to the participants the following day to check for accuracy. The purpose of that focus group was to debrief the successes and challenges of the rural practicum experience and to identify the elements of relational leadership that were evident during the planning and execution of the program. Focus group questions asked about (a) program success; (b) planning and processes related to the logistics of partner selection, funding, student recruitment, travel, and housing necessities, and (c) adherence to curricular requirements and course outcomes. In addition, we asked about emergence of group leadership for faculty and rural leaders, how each person's knowledge and expertise contributed to the planning and execution of the experience, how the relationships between and among university faculty had developed/changed, and individual group members' intentionality and commitment to the group. Those data will be forthcoming in a separate publication.

Utilizing CBPR methodology, school leaders and university faculty participated equally in data analysis. We first analyzed research question 1 data individually to look for emerging themes, later sharing our notes and memos with one another. Those researcher notes and memos were then reanalyzed collaboratively via virtual conferencing to discuss interpretations, suggest themes, and test individual theories. This continual triangulation within the research team and team members' unique perspectives and expertise produced a more in depth and more nuanced understanding of the study's findings and their implications for recruitment/retention. This strategy is known as crystallization (Tracy, 2010). Similarly, our collective attention to analyzing data also demonstrated commitment to the CBPR process and partnerships with rural leaders. This process orientation is also a tenet of relational leadership theory, which advances the importance of a relational group adhering to its purpose and reason for being but also continuing the development of individual

relationships necessary to the efficacy of the group itself (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998).

Findings

Research Question 1: Practicum Students' Perceptions

The immersive rural clinical model positively changed preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching in rural schools. Document review of questionnaires and student reflections indicate that nearly all of the 13 practicum students had some predetermined view that teaching in rural schools was akin to a consolation prize for not being selected for positions in more suburban settings. Students reported that they did not believe there were many advantages to working in a rural school and that the education of rural students was not likely equitable to those in urban/suburban areas. However, initial beliefs and perceptions were challenged shortly after the students' week-long experience began and continued to reflect a growing appreciation for the rural context during the experience and upon its conclusion. Three primary themes emerged, discussed below within the framework of before/during/after, reflecting the change in students' perceptions about teaching in rural schools.

Before the Practicum Experience: Lack of Resources. During the first focus group, practicum students reported that they did not believe there were many advantages to working in a rural school and that the education of rural students was not equitable to those in urban/suburban areas. A widely held perception was that rural schools lacked resources that larger schools enjoyed. In their questionnaire responses, 9 of the 13 students cited a belief that financial resources were not adequate to purchase current materials, including computers and technology-based resources to allow teachers to provide engaging instruction. Three other students (all English education majors) wondered whether students were exposed to curricular materials that promoted the classics of literature and if students had access to novels, magazines, and primary source documents—or if workbooks and basal readers constituted most curricular resources. Samantha (pseudonyms are used for all participants) remarked that she wondered whether

her rural school placement would have adequate or comparable instructional technology to use for lessons.

I know that not all rural schools have access to the internet. I'm not planning on using computers for any of my lessons . . . unless it is for revising their writing or finishing a paper . . . but if internet isn't available, that will limit their creativity and some of the activities we can incorporate.

Samantha's quote also speaks indirectly to a second commonly held perception that, if financial resources were likely limited, so were the instructional strategies of teachers and, perhaps, likewise the professional expertise of teachers. Questionnaire responses indicated that most students did not anticipate they would emerge from their practicum experience with many new instructional strategies or curricular models. Furthermore, fewer than half of the students articulated that the experience was an opportunity to gain pedagogical knowledge. Seth, an English major, offered this presumption: "I saw some outstanding teaching in my high school, so I'm not really looking to gain teaching knowledge, as much as I'm curious about rural places."

Lastly, practicum students were curious about the people in rural spaces, believing them to be somewhat different from themselves. Questionnaire responses often articulated interest in such things as "how rural people live" and "what they do for entertainment." One student, JJ, commented that he was concerned "they won't like me, I'm not like them." William's statement, "I really want to know what the kids are like," might possibly suggest that recent political divides between urban and rural may also be reinforcing perceived differences among groups of people. Initial data from student questionnaires and the first focus group indicate that most of the 13 students had in some way approached the rural practicum experience with a deficit mindset about rural education in general, believing that a perceived lack of resources, both material and human, negatively influenced student learning opportunities. Data also suggest that students wanted to know about people from rural areas in general.

During the Practicum Experience: Supportive Environment. The second focus group occurred on the fourth day of the practicum experience and began with the open-ended question, "Has anything changed in your perceptions about rural schools?" The question was formed after researchers reviewed students' ongoing reflections and found several statements that indicated students encountered situations that reshaped their beliefs. For instance, the perception of limited resources was quickly abandoned by most of the students as they were exposed to modern classrooms with instructional technology including SMART Boards, document cameras, SMART Podiums, and individual real-time response systems (iClicker). Two of the six school districts also had 1:1 technology initiatives with Chromebooks, iPads, or other personal computing devices for every student K-12. Practicum students also were able to see that English curricula boasted novels, primary-source documents, and ample reading materials that promoted literacy and a commitment to learning many different genres of literature. Stephanie, an English education major from a large suburban area, exclaimed that the "school has the same novels I read in high school—that surprised me."

In terms of human resources, almost all students were immediately impressed with the instructional repertoire of their CTs, especially in terms of using a variety of strategies as they taught at least five different grade levels. In all practicum site schools but one, a single English teacher was responsible for teaching all students grades 5–12. Samantha remarked,

Today, I got to co-teach reader's theater, a group writing project, seniors writing their senior thesis, and fifth graders narrating a video for their social studies wax museum. My CT wanted me to experience the variety in teaching multiple classes. . . . She treated me like an equal. . . . I really felt like a teacher today.

Similarly, while none of the initial questionnaire responses addressed curricular integration and articulation, it was evident that the practicum students were now able to see the advantage that

teaching all grades could provide for curricular development and articulation. Mark stated:

I hadn't really thought about the broad English curriculum from middle to high school much, but I can really see how advantageous it is to know . . . really know . . . what each grade has done and what they are capable of. If one group needs more time in a certain area—like writing—you can adjust the entire year to meet those needs.

Nathan also added that he was beginning to see the potential for an individual teacher's creativity to blossom in a rural school because of the trust and support of administration:

My CT said his superintendent trusts him with respect to decisions about curriculum and instruction. But he does expect the CT to bring expertise to the classroom and create readers and writers. There's enormous flexibility about how to teach and even what to teach here. . . . When you are the entire English Department . . . you own the decisions about the genres and novels you teach, when you teach them, and about how you will reinforce important topics.

Following the Practicum Experience: Sense of Community and Appreciation for Rural Students. Our last focus group was conducted after students' return to campus. As researchers reviewed field notes from the evening debriefing sessions (which were held nightly but not recorded as focus group data), we decided to steer the final focus group with two open-ended questions, "What have you learned about rural schools?" and "What will you take away most from this experience?" Two major themes were revealed in this focus group. The first theme to emerge was sense of community, mentioned directly or indirectly by all students. Practicum students were quick to point out how well everyone (i.e., teachers, school leaders, support staff) knew the students in the school and how that contributed to students not being able to fall through the cracks. "They can't hide here," said Mark. Alexis agreed, "In large schools, students can easily go the whole day without being called upon, speaking with peers, or talking directly with a teacher. That just doesn't happen in a small school." A second

element to the sense of community theme was the immediate support from rural school administrators and teachers that practicum students felt upon their arrival. Nathan and Colton told the story of how the superintendent of their school took them with her on a walk to the post office, telling about the history of the community, the school's culture, and even buying them coffee and introducing them as new teachers to some community members gathered at the restaurant. In fact, each of the 13 students met their school's administrator on the first day and were taken on tours of the school and or school/community. Karen said, "I felt looked after, valued, and treated as a professional, not just another student fulfilling pre-service hours."

However, the sense of community also created ambivalence for practicum students, especially in light of how many rural students had seemingly no plans to attend any postsecondary education or out-of-area opportunity beyond high school. Five focus group participants expressed sadness that some rural students were caught in the nexus between staying to find work and leaving to pursue another life chapter. Alexis described how the sense of responsibility to the community may have a detrimental effect on students' life decisions:

I was blown away by the writing skills of the seniors—many had better skills than some of my college friends and classmates. But only three are going to college; I think the rest of the seniors feel bound to the community. They don't want to desert their families or friends. It's like once they are gone, they're gone forever, and if too many leave, the community withers away. Still, some of those students have so much potential.

The second main theme to emerge was appreciation for rural students. Every practicum student mentioned both in written reflections and in focus groups that they had gained an immense appreciation for rural students. Before the rural practicum experience, several students had doubts about the academic capabilities of rural students. However, they soon came to realize that many had received a very high-quality education and were extremely accomplished students, able to pursue rigorous study at the collegiate level. A few students

offered that rural students seemed to “make the most out of a little,” and even though they may not have been exposed to many advanced placement classes, they demonstrated college readiness by their serious pursuit of excellence. Some contrasted students from their own high school experience with students they met in the rural practicum. Mark was pleasantly surprised by the thoughtful engagement the junior English class he taught exhibited. He stated, “Everyone was being polite and respectful, and they were sharing thoughtful ideas, and were thinking deeply about the questions I was asking.”

Positive student interaction was also an element of the appreciation for rural students theme. Seven of the focus group participants spoke to the way that rural students interacted with one another more easily than their counterparts in larger schools. Some of the interaction was thought to be a result of family and community familiarity; still, practicum students could not identify any instances of overt or covert bullying or harassment. Samantha agreed, “Kids were truly nice to each other. That made my life teaching a lot easier.” Nathan added jokingly,

Well there were some very heated discussions on the classic and eternal debate of which was better—Case IH Tractors, or John Deere . . . so they did bicker some and tease quite a bit, but really . . . more unites these kids than divides them.

Finally, JJ, who admittedly was nervous to participate in any practicum experience, revealed that the experience had increased his confidence in being a teacher, because he realized that he could establish relationships with students and that he would not be judged by them for being quirky. JJ’s words punctuated the sentiment for all the participants. He stated,

I wish that I could stay longer in that place. . . I will miss those kids, and it pulls at my heartstrings knowing that even with just a few days of knowing me, that they will miss me, too.

In summary, students’ perceptions about teaching in rural schools changed to a more positive orientation after experiencing the rural practicum opportunity. Participants noted that rural schools

offered them a unique opportunity to learn the art of teaching in a supportive environment with greater curricular and instructional flexibility and outlets for creativity. This gave the practicum participants additional confidence that they would have the support to apply creative instructional strategies to engage students in high levels of learning. Participants also identified the sense of community that rural schools promoted for positively affecting student success.

Research Question 2: Rural Leader/University Faculty Perceptions

Theme I: Breaking Down Stereotypes. The research questions asked of school leaders and university faculty were about the potential of the rural practicum experience to help students better understand teaching in a rural school context and whether the rural practicum model was an effective strategy to address rural teacher recruitment and retention. In the spirit of CBPR, rural leaders were given practicum students’ questionnaire responses and reflections data to analyze collaboratively with the university researchers for research question 1. This strategy allowed school leaders and faculty participants to situate their responses within the themes that emerged from the student data noted above. Additionally, participants included general observations each made during the rural practicum experience. From that data analysis emerged the theme of breaking down stereotypes. During their individual interviews, rural school administrators agreed that the rural practicum experience helped break down stereotypes and the predetermined perceptions that most of the rural practicum students initially voiced about educational equity in rural schools. Administrators felt that perceptions of inadequate technology resources were addressed as practicum students were given opportunities to interact with and witness the effective use of instructional technology by teachers in their schools. While there was general agreement that issues with network bandwidth and internet provider consistency were sometimes more problematic in rural remote locations, teachers worked to impress upon students how technology could be leveraged through use of video and audio assignments that engaged students creatively without relying exclusively on internet access. Administrators also

praised their school's CTs for finding ways to immediately engage the practicum students in teaching or co-teaching classes. Co-teaching allowed CTs to coach the practicum students in real time. As practicum students engaged rural kids in lessons or small-group work, the CTs simultaneously modeled content expertise and instructional skill. Encouraging the practicum students to join in a co-teaching model also caused the students to evaluate the teaching process and immediately seek out technical help from CTs. Reflection and consultation between practicum students and CTs occurred continually. Interview participants felt that this intentional action altered practicum students' initial perceptions about instructional efficacy and rural teacher expertise.

Theme II: Invited into Community. The second theme emerging from the interviews was invited into community. As rural practicum students arrived at their respective school placements, all were greeted by the superintendent/principal and taken on a tour of the school and in some cases the community. This intentional action had been collaboratively determined before the experience. School leaders voiced that they wanted not only to personally welcome the students but also to socialize them into the community as esteemed educational professionals rather than college students collecting observational hours. Each school leader arranged time to meet with his or her respective practicum students each day, exposing them to a variety of activities—including attending faculty meetings, helping with the graduation dress rehearsal, accompanying the superintendent on “walk-through” observations of teaching, and meeting with school board members during the lunch hour. In addition to these activities, school leaders tailored some co-curricular activities to individual practicum student interests. Two of the practicum students had extensive experience in golf and track and were invited to attend high school practices to help coach student athletes. Another student with an interest and skill in dance was invited to give dance lessons after school to help him better connect with students. These opportunities offered practicum students a chance to engage with the school community in other professional capacities outside the teaching act and

enabled them to better understand the benefit of advising or coaching co-curricular opportunities from a financial and rapport building perspective. All interview participants felt that these activities caused practicum students to gain a more nuanced understanding of the school community and how instrumental teacher leader activities were to the success of the school and the achievement of students.

University faculty members also discussed the invited into community theme, albeit differently. Following the nightly debriefing sessions that were held at the home-base hotel, university faculty observed groups of students gathering in the lobby areas with their lessons and materials for the next day. Spontaneously, the practicum students began to offer suggestions and advice to each other about teaching strategies, lesson preparation, and content clarification. These discussions often involved six to eight practicum students, sometimes lasting two hours or more. As faculty observed this process, they realized that they were witnessing the organic development of the practicum students' professional learning community (PLC). Johan exclaimed:

One of the most surprising yet satisfying things for me was getting to witness our students developing their own PLC—without any suggestion or encouragement from us! I'm not even sure most of them know what a PLC is . . . or how it should function . . . but every night . . . right there in front of our eyes, we got to see a real PLC in action.

While not part of an invitation into the school community as illustrated by other thematic data, the PLC development had the effect of inviting students into a community where they functioned together for the first time as professional educators.

Theme III: Benefit to School. Lastly, rural leaders also reported that having practicum students in their schools benefited both teachers and students. Three school leaders saw their rural teachers make more of an effort to “bring their ‘A’ game” during the practicum experience week. Leaders identified more evidence of creative lessons and engaging assignments for K-12 students from their regular rural teachers. Lori, one

of the rural school superintendents, described teachers' mindsets in this quote:

There was a sense among our teachers that they were called upon to mentor and inspire this younger generation of teachers, and they took that seriously. What I saw last week was collegial cooperation and inquiry practiced by both veteran teachers and the practicum students. The co-teaching model created professional learning for everyone.

School leaders also discussed how important it was for the rural high school and middle school students to have interactions with college students and learn about postsecondary opportunities. Each rural leader identified an instance where they overheard their rural students asking the practicum students to talk about what college is like. One of the leaders stated that in her school fewer than one-third of all graduates attend college, and of those attending, she could only identify one former student who finished within the last 5 years. Additionally, school leaders and faculty members alike believed that the partnership between rural schools and the university to bring the rural practicum experience to rural communities could help rural community members view universities as partners in the ongoing effort to prepare and place highly qualified teachers in the rural community. Chris, a university faculty member, remarked:

The future of rural schools depends on their ability to attract and keep teachers. If they can't, schools are in jeopardy of losing students, and closing. Today, I'm hopeful that working together . . . we've taken the first step to change the narrative and put forth a meaningful model of clinical practice that also places more teacher candidates in rural schools.

Discussion

The results from this study show that the rural practicum model was able to provide preservice students with an immersive clinical experience that helped them better understand teaching in a rural context. Faculty and administrator participants also felt it offered a promising model to address recruitment and retention in rural remote states through partnerships between university educator

preparation programs and rural school districts. The rural practicum experience benefited all groups involved with its design and implementation. Practicum students were able to gain an awareness of rural schools and communities that changed their initial beliefs about the educational quality in rural schools. Rural schools created conditions to advance recruitment and retention strategies by working with university personnel to co-construct an authentic clinical model that highlighted advantages to teaching in rural districts, such as supportive and collaborative environments and an overall sense of community. Finally, university faculty were able to leverage relationships across the academy and with rural school leaders to create mutually beneficial partnerships through a process that emphasized shared leadership and decision making.

Equally important to this study is how tenets of relational leadership brought together disparate groups of people seeking to positively influence preservice teachers' views of rural teaching and working in rural communities. Each relational group played an important role in the overall success of the rural practicum experience. Because no one person possessed relationships that crossed every group (i.e., university program faculty, rural school educators, and teacher education students), a hierarchical leadership structure would not have produced the same level of success as the flatter, but highly effective, relational leadership structure. In discussions about how leadership emerged to enable the success of the project, we agreed that the relational dynamic among people within a specific group, and the interactions between the larger groups themselves, created the conditions for multiple group members to exercise some aspect of leadership in directing and accomplishing group and project goals. The success of the model was the result of working side by side as individuals but also leveraging the relationships within our own spheres of influence.

Future Research

The primary reason for conducting this research was to determine the potential of a contextualized, rural clinical experience to better prepare preservice teachers to understand the unique attributes of teaching and working in rural schools. We also

sought to determine whether rural leaders and university personnel perceived that the experience could positively affect recruitment and retention in rural areas. In determining success, we looked only at the perceptions of preservice teachers (practicum students), rural school leaders, and university personnel before, during, and shortly after the rural practicum experience.

We initially asked a fourth research question about the development of relational leadership with university faculty, staff, and school leaders. We determined however that we would reserve that information for a separate publication. Since our first rural practicum pilot in 2017, we have conducted two additional rural practica. Our relational leadership group has grown to include eight additional communities and nearly 20 school leaders. Our hope is to trace the genesis and success of the relational leadership framework through a more thorough study to follow. Other future research includes data collection from three additional cohorts of rural practicum graduates about whether those students took teaching positions in rural schools and whether the rural practicum positively influenced those decisions. There is also a need to continue to investigate the factors that play a role in new graduates' decisions to teach in rural schools and how teacher preparation programs can leverage coursework and/or experiences to highlight the advantages of working in rural areas.

Conclusion

This research demonstrated that school district–university partnerships could co-construct a rural, clinical practice experience that had positive influences on preservice teachers' views of teaching in remote rural areas. School leaders and university faculty also believed that the immersive rural practicum would have a positive influence on recruiting new teachers into small rural schools. Although no specific research question investigated this outcome, participants felt that the existing structure of the relational leadership framework between university faculty and rural school leaders that made the practicum experience possible could also become a hinge point for inviting wider-ranging conversations between rural communities and

higher education. Participants agreed that these wide-ranging conversations create potential for new and diversified postsecondary educational opportunities for rural students while also utilizing the university's research expertise to help rural communities expand business and employment possibilities for citizens. Although sociopolitical divides seem inevitable in today's highly partisan climate (Williams, 2017), school district leaders and university personnel could help bridge those divides by co-creating programs, such as the rural practicum, that bring rural communities and higher education together in long-lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships.

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