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Extending the Conversation: Raising Issues of Rurality in English Teacher Education

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Extending the Conversation

Raising Issues of Rurality in English Teacher Education

Lisa Schade Eckert and Robert Petrone

Despite the fact that each of us taught in English education programs in four other states—all of which have visible rural demographics—it took moving to Montana for us to fully recognize the need for our increased attention to specific issues of rurality when working with preservice English teachers. In Montana, issues of rurality are unavoidable. As the fourth largest state in terms of area (behind Alaska, Texas, and California, respectively), Montana ranks as the state with the third lowest population density in the United States (behind Alaska and Wyoming). Moreover, unlike many other states that are often thought of as rural (e.g., Nebraska, Kansas), no major urban centers exist throughout the entire state; even today, Montana is often referred to as a “frontier” state.

While its wide-open spaces and northern Rocky Mountain vistas provide endless opportunities for recreation and leisure—as well as warrant the state’s unofficial nickname as “The Last Best Place”—Montana’s geographic and demographic realities present those of us working as English educators within the state with several significant challenges. For instance, the distance between our institution’s campus and the many (mostly rural and remote) schools dotted around the state makes it difficult to establish and maintain sustainable connections among master teachers and between master teachers and preservice teachers. Frustratingly, many of these master teachers in rural and remote schools are exactly the teachers who would serve our undergraduate preservice teaching students best, since many of our graduates eventually build their own careers in Montana, where, according to the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 335 of the 421 public school districts in the state are categorized “rural,” and of those 335, 261 are classified as “remote” (<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/page2.asp>).

In contrast, the majority of our students complete their practicum and student teaching experiences in the school districts in and near the community in which our institution is situated (Bozeman), which, as one of the largest and most affluent communities in the state, does not provide students with a set of experiences that are consonant with the teaching contexts the vast majority of them will find—namely small, rural, and remote communities. Thus, nearly all of the graduates end up completing their entire teaching preparation program without ever stepping foot in a rural school or making any formal connections with teachers and students in rural contexts. We liken this situation to preparing teachers to work in urban contexts but never having them actually enter an urban school or connect with teachers and students in urban contexts prior to getting a job in one.

In addition to these infrastructural constraints, our pedagogical practices have been limited in their consideration of rural literacy education. When we each arrived to build our careers in Montana, neither of us possessed a depth of knowledge or research familiarity with issues inherent in rural education. Our training and points of reference had always been focused more on urban, and even suburban, rather than rural concerns. However, it did not take long for our students in Montana—through their stories, questions, and articulated career goals—to push us to reconsider our understandings and perspectives on English teacher education.

For example, Lisa clearly recalls an epiphanic moment in a preservice class discussion centering on identity development and issues of personal disclosure for early-career secondary teachers. One student, whose career goal was to teach high school in the small community in which she had grown up and was weeks away from beginning her student teaching experience, asked how she could navigate balancing her personal life with her professional life. She was particularly concerned about what students should or might know about her. Lisa answered saying that she had always erred on the side of caution in her early career, being careful to keep her personal life separate from her professional life, but acknowledging that it was easier since she had not actually lived in the community in which she taught. The students were shocked; the concept of not living in the community was inconceivable to most of them. The young woman asking the question thought for a moment and said, “But I’ve known them all my life . . . I babysat for most of them!” The rest of the class shared similar stories. Lisa realized that living outside of the community in most rural areas was simply not an option, that the personal and the pedagogical identities of a teacher in this context were essentially inseparable. This was a significant paradigm shift, and she had to deeply reconsider her pedagogical approach and theoretical framework in

preservice classes. In response, she wrote a small internal grant for release time to spend traveling around the state to gain a more personal perspective on the realities of remote and rural school environments.

Robert's moment came during a class he recently taught on youth cultures, media literacy, and English education. Filled with contemporary scholarship on these topics, the majority of which focuses on urban youth of color, the course content required the students to think deeply about students' popular and youth cultural funds of knowledge, how they might use these to help build bridges to traditional academic literacies, and how they might also imagine expanding what counts as academic literacy. While the students

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engaged meaningfully with the selected texts, there came a point in the semester where they began to inquire about scholarship focused on rural youth and their situated literacy and learning practices. Robert found himself at somewhat of a loss to adequately address their questions, particularly when they began asking if scholarship existed that focused on literacy

and learning practices related to ranching, rodeo, as well as the role of basketball in rural communities, particularly related to Native American reservations. While he was able to integrate scholarship related to rural education, particularly recent work done on place-based pedagogy in rural contexts (e.g., Brooke, 2005), he began to wonder how it was that he had not thought more deeply about preparing preservice teachers to work in rural contexts specifically.

While we now see and value the importance of this attention in our predominately rural state, we have also begun to understand that addressing and attending to the issues and needs of rural communities, schools, students, and teachers cannot be relegated only to highly visible rural states such as Montana, Alaska, Wyoming, or the Dakotas. Rural communities exist in every state. In the 2008–09 academic year, for example, 9,628,501 public school students, accounting for 20 percent of the nation's total public school enrollment, attended schools in rural communities (Strange et al., 2012, p. 1). In addition, students from rural communities are increasingly attending suburban and urban schools due to consolidation and closing of rural schools, suggesting that issues of rural education are not just the purview of geographically rural contexts. Therefore, we argue that, more than ever, English teacher educators in every state need to be intentional in their thinking about and addressing the needs of rural English education, especially in relation to preparing preservice English teachers.

We understand the need for increased attention to rural English education as an issue of social justice. As “an often over-looked aspect of diversity education” (Todd & Agnello, 2006, p. 183), rural education involves many issues inherent in social justice education, including poverty, resources, and systemic marginality. For example, the “Formula Fairness Campaign” sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust is an initiative to “[e]nd discrimination against rural and small schools” by drawing attention to inequities in distributing Title I federal funds to support interventions for low-income students, particularly those in rural communities (www.formulafairness.com). As a result of disparities in local and state funding based on enrollment figures, rural schools often struggle to meet criteria for federal requirements defining Highly Qualified Teachers because it is fiscally prohibitive to staff all content areas for all grades in very small schools (Eppley, 2009; Mollenkopf, 2009). Additional challenges exacerbated by the often-disparaging allocation of funds and shrinking tax base for rural schools include resources for accommodations for ELL and special needs students, as well as opportunities for teachers’ professional development.

Like others, we are concerned that increased national policies and agendas are and will continue to be particularly burdensome for rural schools and communities (Eppley, 2009; Miretzky & Stevens, 2012; Strange et al., 2012). Overall, we agree with White and Reid (2008) that “we need to acknowledge that a one size fits all approach is inadequate for addressing the education issues of rural and remote schools” (p. 3). Indeed, the all-but-inevitable introduction of national curricula as a result of Common Core State Standards, SMARTER Balanced and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment consortia (each of which will roll out national assessments for the 2014–15 school year), and federal initiatives such as Race to the Top have exacerbated the “one size fits all approach” to curricular and staffing policies that began with NCLB.

Therefore, as an issue of social justice and in the interest of deepening our understanding of how to continually improve English teacher education, we are calling for increased pedagogical and scholarly attention focusing on the particular challenges and rewards associated with teaching English language arts in rural settings, preparing teachers to teach in rural communities, and supporting rural teachers. The remainder of this piece does two things. First, it provides a broader context for the issues inherent in rural teacher education, including a discussion of programmatic initiatives we have made at our home institution to address these issues. Second, it provides some potential starting points, or as we have come to think of them,

“conversation starters,” for us, as a field, as we move to consider issues of rurality in English education.

Preparing Secondary English Teachers to Teach in Rural Contexts

Our developing awareness of rurality, particularly as an issue of social justice, and inquiry into how to best meet the needs of our students and the English teachers and secondary students in our home state, are situated within a broader call for increased attention to rural education, especially related to the intersections between secondary teacher preparation and rural teaching contexts (Coladarci, 2007). Similar to ours, many teacher preparation programs struggle to provide their students with rural-based field experiences. The prohibitive factors in developing these rural field experiences are cost and time requirements (White, 2006). Because of the distance between rural schools and universities, providing traditional field experiences in rural settings for students who are concurrently enrolled in a full semester of on-campus coursework is usually not feasible. Typically, students must remain within short driving distance of campus for the semester during their practicum, and in some cases, particularly in states like Montana, mountain ranges literally block the way “as the crow flies,” thus eliminating some regional rural communities as potential practicum sites.

A lack of meaningful experiences in rural contexts may help perpetuate and/or inscribe in our students “deficit model” and “rhetoric of lack” conceptions of rural communities and education—discourses that current scholarship has noted often exists in academia and popular culture (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2007; Sharplin, 2010). The concern is that preservice teachers may buy into these dominant narratives of rural deficits, which, if left unexamined, may influence their developing teaching identities, choices of employment opportunities to pursue, and their attitudes toward students and community members in rural communities. In our own experiences at Montana State University, we have found this to be the case. As part of a series of programmatic reforms, we interviewed a small sample of students from our program to better understand their perspectives on not only the program but also teaching in rural contexts. Most of these students—despite the fact that most of them grew up in rural communities in Montana—expressed deficit orientations toward rural education. For instance, a preservice English teacher from our program—a young man who grew up in rural Montana—worried that teaching in a rural school could mean he would “get stuck on the bottom forever.” Another preservice English teacher, a young woman who grew up in rural Montana, lamented, “I guess, if you’re gonna

be a rural teacher, you have to just kinda accept the fact that some of them aren't gonna go to college," suggesting that interest in attending college after high school is an issue limited to rural students. The influence of these deficit and lack discourses related to rurality are particularly concerning since scholarship on rural education emphasizes the intense need for recruitment and placement of rural teachers, especially in the field of special education and in tribal communities (Ludlow & Brannan, 1999).

We have also found that our students' conceptions of rural teaching were often contradictory and unexamined, situated only within their personal educational experiences. For example, one future teacher from our program said in reference to rural teachers: "I think it's basically just teachers who have been there for a long time and are doing everything the same for years and years and years, and it's basically that way with every content area." Conversely, another future English teacher, a young woman who grew up in rural Montana, thought that rural schools "take whatever [English teachers] they can get . . . because they'll get young teachers that . . . really wanna teach and they're ready to start their career and they a lot of times start in smaller communities because it's easier to get a job there and get experience there. And that's really good, but they always leave." For one student, the idea of the rural teacher is one who has been there for a long time, whereas for the other student, rural teachers are always leaving for "better" jobs in non-rural areas.

Furthermore, we are concerned that without meaningful professional experiences in rural classrooms, a significant number of preservice teachers in our program might overly rely on their apprenticeship of observation; in fact, nearly all of the preservice English teachers in our program with whom we talked as part of a series of interviews we conducted for programmatic review indicated that they already knew how to teach in rural contexts because they had grown up in one. Assertions such as "I'm so used to rural community, you know, 'cause I grew up in one" and "I think I know enough about rural schools that I can relate to the students" were reiterated throughout the interviews. While we recognize that such immersion results in a deep knowledge and understanding of rural communities and cultures, we restate our concern that students tend to shape their conceptions of *all* rural schools based on their experience in *one*; therefore, we hope to provide opportunities for students to interrogate and appreciate the pedagogical framework of rural schooling from the perspective of a future teacher who has multiple opportunities to examine issues of rural education rather than as a former student with a single experience.

In response to these many challenges and possibilities, we have begun to conceptualize using digital technologies for building connections between our English education program and rural master teachers and between these master teachers and preservice teachers. We imagine these digital spaces also being used as ways for preservice students to have “virtual” field experiences whereby they learn *about* practice *in* practice (Hammerness & Darling-Hammond, 2005, pp. 401–403; emphasis added) through interaction with master teachers and their students. While this will not entirely alleviate the challenges that confront us, we see the development of these virtual spaces as an important first step in helping to facilitate students’ preparation to work within rural contexts and begin to develop a mentoring and networking mechanism for many of the isolated secondary English teachers throughout the state.

In working toward these programmatic revisions, we are encouraged by recent scholarship that demonstrates how, when made available, practicum experiences in rural contexts help to shift preservice teachers’ conceptions of rurality in general, and rural schools, teachers, and students more specifically. For example, Todd and Agnello (2006) explain how preservice teachers, through close interaction with rural teachers, dispelled their initial perceptions that “the rural school would be inferior to urban/suburban schools” (p. 180), which ultimately better prepared them to work in these environments.

In general, we see the development of these virtual connections as having at least two main purposes. First, these connections and experiences are a part of what contemporary teacher education scholarship suggests comprises successful teachers preparation, namely providing “a full range of field experiences” (NCTE, 2006, p. 64) that “derive from and connect to the content and students they [will] teach” (Hammerness & Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 403), and are “embedded with a broad community of practitioners—experienced teachers, other student teachers, teacher educators, and students, so that they can gain access to the experiences, practice, theories, and knowledge of the profession” (pp. 405–406). Second, and perhaps more importantly, these connections and experiences are designed to draw attention to and examine preservice teachers’ ideas about rurality in general and rural English education more specifically.

To explore the nature of virtual field experiences as a means of connecting our preservice teachers to rural contexts, we are in the process of designing and carrying out a series of projects that examine the affordances and constraints of virtual field experiences in our local English teacher

education program. Specifically, we are developing connections with rural teachers and school districts to link their secondary students with our pre-service teachers enrolled in writing and literature/literacy methods courses, “embedding” field experiences within these methods classes. For example, we linked students from our writing pedagogy class with students in a 10th-grade English class in a rural school. The students exchanged writing weekly, and the experience culminated in a face-to-face meeting at the end of the semester at Montana State University. To facilitate these online exchanges, we used Moodle open source course delivery platform. We chose Moodle because the vast majority of public schools throughout Montana already use Moodle as their digital instructional framework and secondary teachers and students are already familiar with it. Once we were set up, navigating course shell and forum discussion spaces, which are readily accessible to teachers in the field and preservice teachers in our methods classes, was relatively easy. The flexibility, affordability, and secure nature of the platform, as well as its ease of use, provided what we had hoped for in a virtual space that supported our pedagogical goals.

In addition to the actual connections we have established between preservice teachers and rural students, we have found great value in these inquiries due to the theoretical, philosophical, and pedagogical explorations they have created for us as English education scholars. They have pushed us to examine our own assumptions and implicit beliefs about rurality, engage in more culturally responsive pedagogy in our classes, seek out resources within and outside of English education related to rural education, travel to and visit remote schools around the state, and open up new areas of scholarly interest and inquiry for us to pursue. For example, in addition to the preparation of preservice English teachers, we have become increasingly curious about the professional development possibilities virtual spaces hold for the rural English teachers within and outside of Montana. Specifically, we are curious about the possibilities virtual spaces have for rural and remote secondary English teachers to collaborate with one another—something that may help to mitigate feelings of alienation and isolation often reported to us by rural teachers in Montana.

Toward a Rural English Education

As an issue of social justice and in the interest of deepening our understanding of how to continually improve English Education, we are calling for increased pedagogical and research attention focusing on the particular challenges and rewards associated with teaching and preparing teachers to

teach English language arts in rural settings. What follows are our attempts to provide some potential starting points, or as we have come to think of them, “conversation starters,” for us, as a field, to consider as we move forward to advance the educational and civic opportunities for all students.

In general, we encourage English teacher educators to include in their course syllabi readings and discussions centering specifically on rural issues in English education. Although nearly a decade old, we have found two useful starting points to be the special-themed issue of *English Journal* on Rural Schools (Reid, 2004) and the book written by participants of the Nebraska Writing Project, *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing* (Brooke, 2005). Both of these texts consist of teachers’ accounts of the unique features inherent in teaching literacy in rural contexts. Additionally, the theoretical framework of “place-based pedagogy” has provided many of our students with a useful framework to imagine how to meet the unique demands of teaching English in rural communities. For example, one of our recent students, after reading about place-based pedagogy, developed a conceptual unit linking basketball in rural Montana with research writing and analysis of the novel *Blind Your Ponies* by Stanley Gordon West. The National Writing Project’s Rural Sites Network (www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/programs/rsn) also provides resources focusing on teaching in rural communities. We encourage English teacher educators to support practicing teachers to engage in action research projects investigating the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in teaching in rural communities.

In addition to these instructional concerns, we suggest that researchers might explore the dynamics of identity development for rural teachers. As our students were quick to point out to Lisa, being a rural teacher means having (whether by choice or necessity) real knowledge of and relationships with almost everyone in the community, which necessitates the fusing of a teacher’s personal and pedagogical identity early in her career and emphasizes the importance of place in developing a mature teaching identity (Eppley, 2009; Mollenkopf, 2009). This development of a “personal pedagogy” “is a reflection of the subjectivities and ideologies of the teacher. . . . The merging of this dual identity as human being and teacher enables teachers to become much more honest, critical, and inspirational educators” (Alsup & Eckert 2010, p. 10). Examining the intersections of personal, community, and professional spaces, or “borderlands” and the ways these spaces contribute to teacher identity development (Alsup, 2005), “rather than privileging classroom space” (White & Reid, 2008, p. 8) as the site of professional growth, could reveal much about the unique nature of rural teaching and identity development. To extend and further refine these

concepts, teachers and researchers might explore how the process of personal pedagogical development is enhanced or hindered in a rural community. What can we learn from specifically rural teacher identity development that might inform all teacher preparation programs? Are the difficulties of being a teacher when one's personal subjectivities seem in conflict with the school's or community's exacerbated or ameliorated for rural teachers? How do rural teachers balance the many roles they assume when there are fewer English colleagues in their building to share the burden?

Additional lines of inquiry into rural English education might include examining how rural contexts and issues of diversity interplay. Geographically isolated and otherwise rural communities tend to be more racially homogenous, for example, than urban or suburban communities (although this is certainly shifting more recently in the United States). Diversity in rural contexts is often less about race than socioeconomic status and student exceptionalities (gifted/talented, special needs, etc.), both of which, regardless of location, cut across other aspects of diversity (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012). As a result, rural teachers must work as “mediator[s] between the curriculum and the lived experiences of the children . . . to help them understand their relationship with their larger world” (Eppley, 2009, p. 1), translating and transferring existing knowledge of cultural responsiveness to locally constructed contexts, adapting available curricular materials to suit their unique needs. For example, rural teachers often report that inclusion of multicultural voices in their literature instruction requires establishing prior knowledge and addressing preconceived notions that may be held by students. The teacher essentially becomes the representative of outside culture, though she is likely to be culturally homogenous with the community (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012; Mollenkopf, 2009; White & Reid, 2008). Researchers might, then, address issues such as the following: How can/do rural teachers generalize sensitivity and responsiveness to the types of diversity encountered in their communities? How can/do they extend such awareness to the larger cultural diversities in the state, national, and global communities? How can/do they include reading multicultural literature to create vicarious experiences for students coming from a racially homogenous and geographically isolated community?

We also encourage youth literacy researchers to consider focusing more on rural contexts and rural youth. Much contemporary research on youth literacies, for example, has emphasized urban youth and contexts (Kinloch, 2009; Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Paris, 2011). This line of inquiry has rightly located an urgent need for research with and on behalf of marginalized youth in urban contexts, and in doing so has truly

been generative in not only deepening understandings of the literate lives of urban youth but also providing counternarratives that help reframe seemingly normal deficit-oriented ways of thinking about and knowing marginalized youth, as well as make useful implications for urban literacy classrooms (Brass, 2008; Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Morrell, 2004). In fact, a recent special themed issue of *English Education*, “Critical Literacy Research with Urban Youth,” offers several ways this research can inform English teaching and English teacher education. At the same time that we continue to deepen our

At the same time that we continue to deepen our understandings of systemic marginalization of urban youth and their social, cultural, and political uses of literacy, it is incumbent upon us as a field to examine the relations between rural contexts, youth, and literacy.

understandings of systemic marginalization of urban youth and their social, cultural, and political uses of literacy, it is incumbent upon us as a field to examine the relations between rural contexts, youth, and literacy. As Robert’s students wondered, researchers may find value in examining the various literate and cultural frames of reference and funds of knowledge youth bring with them to schools and how literacy educators might work with these to provide culturally

responsive teaching practices. Additionally, literacy researchers, particularly those whose work situates youth literacy within popular and youth cultural contexts, may find value in exploring the interplay between local and global youth and popular cultures among rural and geographically remote youth.

In addition to increased research emphasis on rurality within English education, we argue for increased attention to rurality within the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and other professional organizations related to literacy education. It is clear that membership and participation in professional organizations influences teacher quality and satisfaction (Gere & Berebitsky, 2009). Specifically, content-specific organizations such as NCTE support continual development of teacher content knowledge; such knowledge is required to exert the curricular authority we argue is crucial for rural educators who are more likely to be responsible for designing and implementing multi-grade curricular requirements. Moreover, we wonder how NCTE, for instance, might facilitate the level of rural teacher participation and influence in public policy discussions. We are concerned specifically that the current emphasis on student achievement on standardized assessments as a measure of teacher quality will have dramatic and negative implications for rural teachers and that having an active role and voice in NCTE would afford teachers who may be geographically isolated the means to contribute to and benefit from larger policy discussions.

Given the logistical and financial systemic difficulties that often block rural educators from attending conferences and workshops, we wonder about stipends and scholarships NCTE might make available for rural teachers. Furthermore, we imagine that it would benefit rural teachers and English teacher educators for NCTE to increase its attention on issues of rurality by possibly reactivating its rural caucus and offering special-themed issues of its journal publications to highlight the unique aspects of rural education. For example, we can imagine a special themed issue, akin to the previously mentioned issues focused on urban youth, related to the implications for English teaching and English teacher education from research on literacy with rural youth or rural teachers and researchers discussing the affordances and constraints of rural literacy teaching and learning.

Overall, the issues confronting rural literacy teachers and English educators interested in preparing future teachers to work within rural contexts are multifaceted and complex. We offer these starting points, or “conversation starters,” as one way to move along the dialogue within English education to continue its work in providing all students a socially just, responsive education.

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2013 CEE Election Results

CEE Executive Committee (four-year terms)

Mollie Blackburn, Ohio State University, Columbus
Thomas M. McCann, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb
Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

2015–2014 CEE Nominating Committee

Susan L. Groenke, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, chair
Allison E. Carey, Marshall University, Huntington, WV
Jung E. Kim, Lewis University, Romeoville, IL
Allison Skerrett, University of Texas at Austin
Peter Williamson, University of San Francisco, CA

On the NCTE website, you can see additional 2013 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2014 elections (<http://www.ncte.org/volunteer/elections>).

Changes Proposed to CEE Constitution and Bylaws

A vote to approve the proposed CEE Constitution and Bylaws changes will take place at the CEE Membership Meeting and Social at 4:00 – 5:50 p.m. on Friday, November 22, 2013, in Boston during the NCTE Annual Convention. The changes can be seen at <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CEE/CEEConstitutionBylaw-Changes.doc>.