A Global View of Rural Education: Teacher Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention

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Rural education remains an area of great concern for policymakers and the people who populate rural areas worldwide. Some researchers have argued that although rural and urban schools often have much in common in terms of levels of poverty and lack of resources, the bulk of the current educational literature is directed at an understanding of urban school districts (e.g. Barrett, Cowen, Toma, & Troske, 2015; Beeson & Strange, 2000; Bouck, 2004). However, the literature on rural education also asserts that there are qualities unique to rural sites that demand increased attention in the field of educational research (Arnold, et al., 2005; Beeson & Strange, 2000; Eppley, 2009; Khattri, et al., 1997). Considering that a large portion of the world’s schools are located in rural areas, it is important to attend to the unique needs of rural teachers and students.

The issue is important both within the United States and around the world. In the United States alone in 2003, more than half of the nation’s school districts and more than a third of the nation’s public schools were in rural areas (Provasnik, KewalRamani, McLaughlin Coleman, Gilberston, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Despite these statistics, national education policies often do not fit with the needs and material circumstances of rural school districts (Eppley, 2009; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). In her critical policy analysis of the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act*, for example, Karen Eppley (2009) found:

The only response from policy makers to rural schools regarding highly qualified teacher mandates thus far has been the so-called flexibility provision, a misdirected and inadequate attempt to mitigate the law’s effects in rural schools. Instead, rural educators need to provide clear explanations to policymakers about what constitutes a highly qualified rural teacher, and provisions to laws need to account for

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the distinct differences needed for high
quality instruction in diverse rural
communities. (p. 9).

Without policies tailored to the unique
context of rural schools and communities,
ensuring equity of access, resources, and
opportunity in schools across the United States
becomes a difficult task.

The importance of this issue is also
striking at the international level. Globally there
were still 121 million children and adolescents
out of school in 2012, despite the progress
toward the 2015 Education For All (EFA) goals
for universal access to education (UNESCO,
2015). Although there has been progress in
reaching these goals, it is clear that there is
much left to do and that educational quality
remains a challenge. The rural-urban gap is
particularly acute in developing countries and is
reflected in a variety of areas including adult
literacy, pre-primary education, primary school
completion and the likelihood that a child will
transition from primary to secondary school

While multiple factors have been
implicated in addressing global concerns about
education (e.g. concerns about infrastructure,
overcrowding, lack of textbooks and high quality
learning materials), at every turn, issues related
to teacher preparation, recruitment, and
retention are among the most widely
acknowledged barriers to solving the quality
challenge. A wide-ranging evaluation of rural
educational research in the United States
conducted by Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and
Dean (2005) identified nine priority topics for
future research. Teacher quality, especially as it
relates to the recruitment, development, and
retention of teachers in rural contexts, was
among the areas of identified need. In 2011,
the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)
estimated that around the world, two million
new teaching positions were needed to ensure
universal primary education by 2015, and by
2030 the worldwide demand for teachers would
rise to 25.8 million. UNESCO acknowledged that
the shortage of teachers was an obstacle to
reaching the Education for All (EFA) and
Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The
UNESCO Strategy on Teachers 2012-2015
emphasized the importance of teacher
preparation and building a high-quality teaching
force in countries hampered by the lack of
teachers (UNESCO Strategy on Teachers, 2012,
p. 2). Moreover, the lack of qualified teachers
contributes to other concerns related to
educational quality such as overcrowding and
high pupil/teacher ratios. Efforts to address the
lack of teachers – such as hiring teachers that
are not trained in national standards – further
contribute to problems of educational quality.
The 2013/2014 EFA monitoring report
emphasized the importance of investing in
teachers, noting that “in around a third of
countries, fewer than 75% of primary school
teachers are trained according to national
standards. And in a third of countries, the
challenge of training existing teachers is worse
than that of recruiting and training new
teachers” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 5).

With these concerns in mind, the articles
in this issue of Global Education Review address
the important topics of teacher preparation,
recruitment, and retention in rural education. A
number of the abstracts we received in response
to our call for papers for this issue tackled these
three topics, a testament to the prevalence of
these concerns and the efforts to address them
in rural school districts around the world.

Lois Meyer’s article “Teaching Our Own
Babies: Teachers’ Life Journeys into
Community-Based Initial Education in
Indigenous Oaxaca, Mexico” focuses on a
teacher preparation program dedicated to the
education of babies and very young children and
that builds on the local wisdom and practices
related to child development. In valuing each
teacher’s life story and experiences, Meyer finds
that the teachers bring vital local knowledge of language, culture, and learning to their communities. Similarly, Frances Vitali’s work with preservice teachers in northwestern New Mexico celebrates the power of a family literacy project to deepen and expand teachers’ understandings of the diverse oracy and literacy practices of the school community. In preparing the preservice teachers to listen closely to their students’ life stories and inviting family members into the classroom, the preservice teachers are better prepared to be culturally relevant teachers of linguistically and culturally diverse children.

In this issue, we include two articles that examine the potential of mentorship programs to support and enhance in-service teachers’ practice. Katy de la Garza examines a teacher mentorship program in rural and indigenous Guatemalan schools. While her study finds inequalities in mentorship based on access, depth of knowledge, and cultural constraints, she argues that pedagogical mentorship offers possibilities to support teachers when it is included as part of a larger picture of preparing and sustaining rural teachers. Anni Lindenberg, Kathryn Henderson, and Leah Durán examine the role of mentorship in combination with math content videos to promote education in rural primary schools in Nicaragua. Of particular importance here is the role of this model in providing for collaboration, mutual support, and flexibility in applying the intervention model to specific classrooms as well as in the building of pedagogical knowledge.

Two articles by Mukeredzi and by Azano and Stewart highlight the importance of preparing preservice teachers to more fully understand rurality as a context for their teaching. In Tabitha Mukeredzi’s article “The ‘Journey to Becoming’: Pre-service Teachers’ Experiences and Understandings of Rural School Practicum in a South African Context,” she describes a practicum for preservice teachers embedded in rural schools and communities. She finds that an immersive rural school experience challenges the future teachers’ assumptions about rural schools and students. Teacher education programs focused on preparing teachers for rural school contexts, she argues, are key to rural schools’ recruitment and retention difficulties. Similarly, Amy Price Azano and Trevor Stewart argue that preservice teachers need opportunities to apply and think through how to make their curricula relevant for rural students and communities in their article “Confronting Challenges at the Intersection of Rurality, Place, and Teacher Preparation: Improving Efforts in Teacher Education to Staff Rural Schools.” With teacher education courses that attend to issues of place and culture, the preservice English teachers in this study become more conscious of and responsive to rural concerns.

Finally, teacher retention in Alaska is the central concern of “Stemming the Revolving Door: Teacher Retention and Attrition in Arctic Alaska Schools” by Ute Kaden, Philip Patterson, Joanne Healy, and Barbara Adams. In this study the authors find that the factors that impact retention are complex and intertwined, and a strong structure of school and community support for teachers is an important component. Regardless of the complexity, however, the authors argue that school leaders need to develop an individualized and strategic plan to retain and support their rural Alaskan teachers.

Taken as a whole, these articles reflect the diversity and the complexity of rural educational contexts while also promoting a deep appreciation for the particular challenges that rural school districts face in effort to prepare, attract, and retain highly qualified teachers. A common thread running through these articles is the centrality of cultural relevance in the rural school curriculum and pedagogy. The need for cultural relevance highlights the important understanding that rural school communities
have unique needs and structures that require specialized preparation and retention methods. With a deeper understanding of the characteristics and qualities of the rural communities, teachers will be better able to successfully teach and meet the local needs of the communities, moving us closer to the goal of ensuring quality education for all.

References

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