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 (2015 Global Monitoring Report).

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.

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