

# Community, Place, and Culture: Pillars of Sustainability and Deep Connection for Rural Schools

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In this chapter, the author chronicles experiences living and teaching in three rural communities in the Midwest and, consequently, these experiences' impacts on practice. The chapter begins with a discussion on rural sustainability and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Next, themes of community, place, and culture are explored. Pedagogical practices such as place-based education are discussed. Then, authentic experiences from three uniquely diverse settings are shared. Finally, a statement about how these stories and lived experiences shape teacher educator identity and practice is provided.*

## INTRODUCTION

Rural settings offer unique opportunities to incorporate a sense of community, place, and culture into pedagogical practice. Closely knitted relationships and deep understanding of the intricacies of community, place, and culture heighten the rural school's ability to help students connect with school, community, and the world (Waller & Barrentine, 2015; Barely & Beesley, 2007). Yet, for many children, their own geographical context is absent from the school setting. This is also true for teacher preparation programs; these programs often overlook "geographically isolated, rural contexts" (Burton & Johnson, 2010, p. 376). It is not surprising that isolating experiences are common among rural pre-service teachers because rural students are frequently the "forgotten minority" (Anazo & Stewart, 2015, p. 1) in teacher preparation programs.

Therefore, stories from rural schools and communities need to be shared. For me, rural settings house the stories that have shaped me—as a learner, a teacher and a teacher educator. This chapter will address three crucial times in my own personal and professional development. First, my personal background having grown up in a small farming community provided me with a grounding in navigating life in rural communities and shaped values of community, place and cultural understanding. Second, my first teach-

ing job at a rural charter school in central Minnesota provided opportunity to implement and further develop these core values. The final setting provided a deepened understanding of culture. These three settings discussed have three commonalities: community, place, and culture.

I begin with exploring the importance of context in maintaining rural sustainability. Because of outmigration of youth from rural communities, the sustainability of many small communities is in crisis. This section provides a foundation of understanding as to why contextualized education is important for rural communities. Next, I discuss the importance of culturally sustaining practices. In all three settings, cultural diversity was a major theme and this section provides a framework as to why culture needs to be recognized in school practices. Next, I will share stories from my childhood and from my teaching experiences, couching them within the framework of community, place, and culture. Finally, I offer possible solutions for teacher education programs in considering these three factors in their own curriculum.

## **SUSTAINABILITY FOR RURAL DIVERSE COMMUNITIES**

Although rural places can be wonderful places to live and work, the future of rural communities is somewhat bleak. Outmigration of children from rural communities is common; children often leave due to of job market and economic decline (Waller, 2011; Wood, 2008). Carr and Kefalas (2008) label this the *rural brain drain*. The rural brain drain is highly problematic for rural sustainability. As communities lose population, particularly the best and brightest students, likelihood of solving problems related to shrinking populations becomes difficult. Success is frequently measured solely by leaving the community.

Carr and Kefalas's (2008) book, *Hollowing out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for Rural America*, examines further this outmigration of youth. In this ethnographic study, taking place in Ellis, Iowa, the authors identify four groups of students: *achievers*, *stayers*, *seekers*, and *returners*. The achievers were those who left Ellis for work in larger urban centers. Stayers stayed in the community and entered family life and the work force early on. Seekers sought opportunities outside of Ellis, often in the military, or non-college opportunities. Returners came back to Ellis, and often had professional employment within the community following a brief period of time away (also discussed in Waller, 2011.)

The rural brain drain also affects quality teacher recruitment. Anazo and Stewart (2015) assert that recruiting qualified teachers is a challenge for rural schools, because of "lack of community amenities, geographic and professional isolation, lower salaries, and higher poverty rates" (p. 1). Although recruitment of qualified teachers is problematic for rural settings, the needs of rural students are unique and require teachers to not only be qualified in content, but also be qualified in understanding their unique setting (Azano & Stewart; Waller & Dahle-Huff, 2019). Understanding this context is important in planning for so many of the unanticipated events that occur within classroom settings. For instance, teachers working in a rural setting in a cold climate may have to account for snow days or bussing issues. For these reasons, while rural schools often attract less than qualified teachers, the specialized needs of rural schools actually require their teachers to *more qualified* (Anazo & Stewart) than other teachers.

Schools can play a vital role in bolstering sustainability for rural communities. Sobel's (2004) concept of *place-based education* highlights the importance of bringing the locality into the classroom setting. While teachers often face pressure to implement standardizing curricula, decontextualizing curriculum actually erases background experiences necessary for deeper, more meaningful understandings (Eppey, 2011). Eppey argues that when schools focus solely on the acquisition of basic skills without attention to context, not only are opportunities lost for students to build meaningful connections, students also

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