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Field Experience...Rural Style: A Qualitative Study of One Student Teacher's Beliefs

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Abstract

Providing student teachers and pre-student teachers with diverse field placement experiences greatly contributes to the development of their instructional and professional practice. This article describes a case study focusing on one student teacher's beliefs and perceptions about the rural school in which he completed a seven week student teaching experience. Data was collected through a series of six interviews throughout the seven week experience in which the student teacher shared his beliefs about the school setting, his cooperating teacher, the students, the classroom environment, technology, resources, and the school staff and administration prior to beginning the experience and following the completion of the student teaching experience. Findings reveal that post-experience beliefs differed regarding the school setting, faculty and administration, and the availability of technology and resources. Pre-experience beliefs about the students, cooperating teacher, and school curriculum were consistent with post-experience beliefs.

Keywords: Student teaching, teacher preparation, rural field placements, supervision, student teacher's beliefs

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Providing teacher candidates with a variety of school experiences is essential to the development of a teacher candidate. Most colleges and universities require teacher candidates to complete a specific number of hours in a variety of school placement sites. Rural school placements offer new and unique learning experiences that cannot be found in larger urban school settings. Each type of field placement presents different types of learning experiences for pre-service teachers. All types of field placements have the potential to influence and shape the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs pre-service teachers form about public education and the teaching profession.

Rural school settings may be described in a variety of ways. Some rural schools are located in remote, isolated areas many miles from metropolitan areas or other small communities. Research studies indicate specific attributes that rural schools and rural communities commonly share. The National Center for Education Statistics (2007) define rural schools as schools located in areas having 2,500 or less persons and situated no less than 5 miles and no greater than 25 miles from urban areas. Distance from metropolitan areas, sparsely populated areas, small geographic size, small teaching faculty and class sizes are common attributes of rural schools and communities (Monk, 2007). Small class sizes characteristic in rural schools often require teachers to teach multiple subjects or multiple grade levels (Barley, 2009). Smaller enrollments may also foster more positive teacher- student relationships in which classroom teachers spend more time interacting closely with students and differentiating instruction to meet individual student needs (Patterson & Kaden, 2013). Communities also play an important role in rural school districts. Families living in smaller communities often have a

higher degree of involvement in their small community school districts than larger school districts (Patterson & Kaden, 2008). Parents may be more visible at rural schools as they often volunteer and participate in school events more frequently than those living in urban areas. Parental involvement in rural school classrooms may also be slightly higher than suburban and rural schools (Fry & Anderson, 2011).

Rural schools may also often have difficulty filling teaching vacancies and keeping hired teachers on staff (White & Reid, 2008). Geographical isolation, lower salaries, lack of quality resources and educational materials, economically challenged surrounding communities, increased workloads and expectations to teach multiple grade levels and subject areas are some reasons teachers leave rural school appointments (Hudson & Hudson, 2008). Compared to urban schools, rural schools have lower student to teacher ratios, teachers are less racially or ethnically diverse, teachers receive lower salaries, but rural public school teachers report greater satisfaction with the teaching conditions at their school than their city school counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Although rural teachers report greater satisfaction with their schools, negative stereotypes can emerge that may discourage young novice teachers to seek employment opportunities in rural schools. In order to increase teacher retention and recruit new teachers to rural schools, it is important for teacher preparation programs to provide rural placement opportunities which will help pre-service teachers to develop positive attitudes, overcome anxieties, and experience rural education contexts (Sharplin, 2010).

Teacher preparation programs often utilize rural and urban school settings for pre-student teaching field placements and student teaching experiences for students. Specific rural and urban

school sites are selected for a variety of reasons. Some students may be interested in seeking future employment at a rural school district and desire diverse experiences in a smaller setting. Studies by Burton and Johnson (2010) and Bergman (2013) indicate that the types of field placements experienced by pre-student teachers have a direct impact on their perceptions and development as educators. Lock's study (2008) also suggests that pre-student teachers need exposure to rural schools in order to more fully prepare them to meet the conditions and challenges characteristic of rural schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the case study investigation.

1. What pre-experience beliefs did the student teacher have about a rural student teaching placement?
2. Which pre-experience beliefs were changed or modified following the seven week student teaching experience at a rural school district?
3. Which pre-experience beliefs were not changed following the seven week student teacher experience?

Case Study Participant

The case study participant, Jon, was an elementary education major in the final semester of his undergraduate studies. During his undergraduate studies, Jon completed three field practicum placements located near the campus. He expressed an interest in experiencing a student teaching placement in a smaller, rural school district. Jon's previous field experiences

with larger, suburban elementary schools and his interest in experiencing a rural field placement were the reasons he was selected to participate in this case study.

Participating School District

The site selected for this study was a school located approximately eighteen miles in a neighboring county from the college campus attended by the participant. The elementary school contained approximately 412 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 4. There are approximately twenty-five core classroom teachers. The percentage of students from low-income families that attend the school is 54.7% ("Title 1 Schoolwide," 2012).

Method

A qualitative case study analysis was selected as the methodology for this research study. Data was collected through six interviews conducted with the student teacher participant during a seven week student teaching experience. Each interview was conducted with a conversation style format lasting approximately 20-25 minutes per interview session. Interview questions were developed by the researcher and focused on the participant's beliefs, ideas, and reflections before, during, and following completion of the student teaching placement. Interview questions focused on the school site, cooperating teacher, students, classroom environment, technology and resources, and the school staff and administration.

Pre-Experience Beliefs

During the pre- experience interview, Jon stated that he visited the school website and learned that the school district was located in a rural school district in a small town. Determining the full appearance of the school was difficult based on the picture contained on the website, but

he assumed that the school was probably an older school that may have been renovated, but in need of some repairs. When asked about his early impressions and beliefs about the school, curriculum, resources, technology, and students, Jon said he wondered if the school had a computer lab, a Smart Board or Promethean Board, small class sizes, and specific programs designed for learning support and special needs students. He said he expected to find small class sizes, a small teaching faculty with approximately two teachers per grade level, and limited instructional materials, resources, and technology. The computer technology and resources were probably adequate, but the software may not be updated, he shared. He stated that did not expect to find a Smart Board or Promethean Board in each classroom, but an older model might be present somewhere in the school. Limited classroom resources, lack of current teaching materials, and aging technological tools were identified as possible challenges Jon anticipated he would encounter at the placement.

Jon believed that there could be a low percentage of students from culturally diverse backgrounds and a higher percentage of students from low income families present at the school. He also said he expected to be teaching students with a variety of needs and ability levels. He also assumed that the school district provided appropriate services for special needs students.

Following the first contact he made with the cooperating teacher, Jon described his cooperating teacher as “friendly and easy-going.” Jon inferred that the cooperating teacher appeared to be interested in meeting Jon and acquainting him with the students and school. “An experienced, supportive, and positive cooperating teacher who relates well to his students” was what Jon anticipated he would find as he observed and worked with his cooperating teacher.

During the pre-experience interview, Jon shared that he hoped to have the opportunity to interact with the classroom teachers and principal. “I imagine that the teachers and principal have specific duties and responsibilities similar to those in larger schools,” he noted. “Schools share common problems and responsibilities, so I’m not sure what I expect to find out during the experience,” he added. “Salaries are probably not as high for teachers and principals at this school, so the turnover rate may be higher at this school than at a city school,” Jon guessed.

Results

At the preliminary visit, Jon found the school resting at the top of a small hill located at the south end of a small town. He noticed a thickly wooded area behind the school, a moderately sized playground to the right of the building, and a large parking lot located at the front of the building. To Jon’s surprise, the red brick school looked relatively modern and appeared to have been recently renovated. Double glass doors, a security camera, and an intercom system stood at the doorway to the school. At first sight, the playground equipment was brightly colored and appeared to be newly installed. “I was really surprised to see the school looking more modern than I originally thought,” Jon shared during his second interview. He said what he expected to find was an older building looking weathered and in need of a face-lift. “The mental picture I formed about the school’s appearance was not what I actually saw,” Jon noted.

The classroom environment. During the third interview, Jon discussed his first day at the student teaching placement and the classroom environment. Large display boards filled with student work and colorful displays were among the first things Jon noticed. “The display boards really made the school look modern and visually appealing,” Jon shared. “Although the school was built in 1965, it didn’t look like it was nearly fifty years old,” Jon admitted. Jon later

learned that the school was remodeled about fifteen years ago, which explained its more modern appearance. The floor in the hallway was clean and polished and the furniture appeared to be relatively new.

After meeting his cooperating teacher and becoming acquainted with the classroom, Jon described the classroom as being heavily decorated with a variety of science models, charts, displays, pictures, books, posters, experiments, and other paperwork. In addition to the array of materials, Jon was very surprised to see a Smart Board, document camera, VCR/DVR, digital camera, and television located in the classroom. He did not expect to find updated technology in any classroom in this school, but was shocked to learn that all of the classrooms from grades Kindergarten through Grade 4 had the same technological equipment in the classrooms. An overhead projector, a VCR, and one classroom computer in each classroom and one Smart Board was the extent of technological equipment Jon expected to find in this classroom.

The cooperating teacher. Jon's cooperating teacher and the classroom curriculum were the subjects of the fourth interview. Jon's cooperating teacher was a "veteran" teacher who had been teaching at the school for thirty-seven years. Jon learned that there were four fourth grade classrooms in the school and his cooperating teacher taught science to all of the fourth graders each day. Jon described his cooperating teacher to be "extremely knowledgeable, encouraging, supportive, friendly, and welcoming." "He really tried to make me feel comfortable in his classroom and he urged me to try a variety of teaching techniques during the semester." "I could see that the students respected him and he had an easy-going way of interacting with the students," Jon added. "I thought the classroom was very well managed and the students knew

what he expected from them.” He concluded that his cooperating teacher’s personality and manner confirmed his pre-experience beliefs.

The school curriculum. Before beginning to teach his own lessons to the class, Jon observed his cooperating teacher teach several lessons. He also had the opportunity to observe the other fourth grade teachers teach the other core subjects which comprised the fourth grade curriculum. During the fourth interview, Jon stated that he expected to have the opportunity to teach an inquiry based science curriculum that was reflective of the state science standards. As he became familiar with the science curriculum, his pre-experience beliefs about the school science curriculum were confirmed. Jon noticed that the curriculum materials were current, age appropriate and reflected the state standards. “The science curriculum was similar to another school curriculum I observed before student teaching,” he shared. “I was really surprised to see the students using the FOSS curriculum kits,” Jon stated. (Full Option Science System) FOSS (Lawrence Hall of Science, 2009) is a research-based science curriculum developed by the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California at Berkeley. Jon reported that his cooperating teacher told him that educational grant money funded the purchase of these science kits for grades 2, 3, and 4. “It’s disappointing that the other classrooms did not receive the FOSS kits, but I guess the grant money can’t fund everything a school district needs,” he mused. Jon realized that the school was very dependent upon educational grant money and state funding to support the technology and curriculum resources.

The students. The students, school staff, and the school administration were the topics discussed during the fifth interview. “The characteristics and backgrounds of the students didn’t surprise me as they were similar to students I worked with in other field placements,” Jon

reported. “I didn’t expect to find lots of diversity in my classroom or at the school and I thought that there would most likely be a higher number of students from low income families.” He discovered that the majority of students who attended the school lived within the small town, in one of the two low-income housing projects located outside the town, or they lived in the surrounding rural areas. There were few culturally diverse students, but a large number of students from single parent homes. Approximately 40% of the students in Jon’s classroom received learning support services. Jon observed daily differentiated instruction and learned to incorporate appropriate differentiated instructional practices into his own lessons. The school district offered a variety of services for special needs students and employed three specialized teachers. “In my opinion, the school district is not lacking in its curriculum, resources, and services for all of the students,” he added. The school received state funding to offer learning support programs, one Pre-Kindergarten classroom, and a classroom for adaptive and physical needs. The services present in the school were based on the school’s current enrollment.

Jon noticed that many teachers on staff often volunteered their time to offer additional math and reading tutoring to the students. Jon concluded that the teachers at this school appeared to be committed to helping the students to improve and succeed. Jon inferred that due to the smaller enrollment and the familiarity of the families and students who attended the school, older and younger students played together and interacted frequently and in a positive manner. “The close-knit community feeling at this school and among the students and staff was obvious,” Jon commented.

School faculty and administration. Jon admitted that he did not form any specific beliefs or opinions about the school staff and administration during the pre-experience interview.

Early in the placement, he was introduced to the school principal and interacted with some of the other classroom teachers. “It was unfortunate that I didn’t get the chance to frequently interact with all of the faculty and staff due to our schedules, but I did attend a few faculty meetings during the experience,” he observed. “The principal appeared to be respected by the faculty and staff and I didn’t observe any major conflicts during meetings,” he added.

On his first visit, Jon met the school principal and learned a bit about the school district. One Pre-Kindergarten - 4 elementary school, one middle school for grades 5-7, and one high school for grades 9-12 comprised the school district. Each school site was led by one principal. “I did not expect to find more than one elementary principal and that was exactly what I discovered,” Jon added. The principal at the elementary school previously taught several years at the middle school in the school district before becoming the elementary principal. The school district also had one superintendent. There were no assistant principals or assistant superintendents at the school district. The school district wasn’t large enough to employ assistant principals or assistant superintendents. Jon realized that the administrators employed by this school district must have a tremendous amount of responsibilities and duties as they guide their schools. “With no administrative support staff, the administrators have to be skilled in a variety of areas and must build a positive community relationships and partnerships to effectively guide the school district,” he reflected. “I’m guessing that the teacher and administrator salaries are much lower than those at urban school districts,” he concluded.

Technology and classroom resources. Jon admitted during the pre-experience interview that he expected to find few or outdated computers and other technological tools. “I was totally shocked to find an updated computer lab in the school and a Smart Board and a

document camera in each classroom,” he reported during the sixth interview. “I was also very surprised to see that the computers and technology appeared to be relatively new and in good working condition.” During a conversation with the principal, Jon learned that the school district was awarded grant money to purchase the computers, Smart Board, and document cameras. Several iPads were also ordered for the school’s computer lab. Frequently updating and maintaining the computers and technology would be a challenge and would be based on the amount of funds available in the coming years, Jon’s teacher shared. The amount of technology Jon observed was significantly less than at one of the larger schools he previously visited, but he was satisfied and surprised with what this rural school had to offer its students.

In addition to the technology, the school district received grant money to purchase other educational supplies. “I wondered why my cooperating teacher’s classroom seemed to be overflowing with a variety of classroom materials and resources, but I later found out that he saves lots of materials because of the changes in budget from year to year,” Jon stated. “Teachers in small schools have to be very resourceful and creative with the use of their classroom resources and materials as they don’t know if and when they’ll be able to order newer resources,” he added. He also realized that most large urban schools with larger budgets have an advantage over rural schools when purchasing classroom materials and curriculum resources.

Post -Experience Beliefs

Following this student teaching experience, Jon reflected upon his experience and compared it to his previous field experiences. He realized that some of his pre-experience beliefs and opinions prior to the experience were different from the post-experience beliefs. Jon enjoyed the small, community-oriented atmosphere he experienced at the rural school. Some of

his previous beliefs about the availability and use of current technology and resources and the appearance of the school were incorrect. “Not all rural schools are old and in desperate need of repairs,” he admitted. Although the school was not new, it was visually appealing and in good physical condition. It also contained updated technology, curriculum resources, and special services to meet the needs of its students. In his opinion, the teachers he observed were highly qualified and committed to their students. Several teachers Jon met at the school appeared to have been teaching there for at least seven or more years. It appeared that once hired, the teachers retained their positions at the school and the turnover rate at this school district was low.

Jon admitted that he never realized how much rural schools depend on state funding and grant money. The amount and quality of materials and equipment is directly related to the amount of money schools receive. The size and location of the community also affects the number of faculty, administration, and services rural schools can provide. Although he didn’t receive any specific information about teacher salaries, Jon assumed that the salaries were also influenced by the size of the school district and the amount of funding received. Many factors influence the function of a school district and this experience gave Jon a new awareness of how schools function within a smaller community.

School districts are often a reflection of the communities in which they are located. Based on that statement, Jon viewed this rural community as a relaxed, quiet, and family-oriented area. Unfortunately, he didn’t get the chance to learn more about the community due to time constraints. When asked about his overall impression of this experience, Jon responded, “The positive attitudes, supportive and helpful teachers, friendly students, and relaxed classroom environment really appealed to me.” “I would really like to teach at a school like this one,” he

added. “It was a great learning experience which helped to re-shape some of my beliefs and attitudes about rural schools,” he further commented. “I could envision myself seeking employment at a rural school district after graduating from college.” He also admitted that some of his pre-experience beliefs about the school appearance, the availability of teaching resources and technology, and the school curriculum differed and were modified following the experience, while his beliefs about the students and his cooperating teacher were more accurate. (See Appendix A for a brief comparison of the pre-experience and post-experience beliefs.)

Limitations

The amount of time the participant spent student teaching in the rural school presents a limitation. The participant spent seven weeks in the placement and could have gathered more information about the school district and surrounding community during a longer student teaching experience at this site. A longer experience would have also provided the student teacher with more opportunities to interact with the faculty, administration, and parents. Due to time and schedule constraints, the participant was not able to spend considerable time observing and interacting with the teaching faculty and spent the majority of his time observing and working with his cooperating teacher.

Post-experience beliefs about the teachers are based on the participant’s interactions with the cooperating teacher and may not be generalized to the entire school faculty. The participant also had few interactions with the school principal during the experience and received limited information about the school community and school district. More frequent interaction with the principal may have further influenced the participant’s post-experience beliefs about the teachers, students, school curriculum, and school district. Additional study focusing on the

interactions of parents and families with the teachers and administration of rural schools would also provide valuable information about the dynamics of family school collaboration in rural settings.

The information obtained during the interviews pertained only to the elementary school where the participant was student teaching and not to the entire school district. This also presents a limitation to the study as it is difficult to get a sense of the entire school district when the participant did not have the opportunity to visit the middle school and high school associated with the school district. Expanding the study to include a participant student teaching at the middle level and high school level would have also provided additional information about student beliefs.

The participant's previous field experiences in larger schools and his limited exposure to smaller, rural schools may have also influenced the pre-experience beliefs and the comparisons he made throughout the experience. Another limiting factor emerged due to the fact that the participant primarily observed and instructed the fourth grade science curriculum during the experience. His post-experience responses regarding the school curriculum primarily pertain to the science curriculum and may not be reflective of all subject areas taught at the school. Additional exposure to all subject areas would have produced more information about the entire school curriculum.

The interview questions may also be considered a limitation in this study. The interview questions focus on specific aspects of the rural school and may have influenced the participant to direct his observations and responses to only those aspects and not on other attributes of the school that may have been observed and experienced. More interview questions encouraging the

participant to include additional information about the school may have increased the participant's responses and expanded his beliefs.

Further Research

The information presented in this case study indicates that student teachers have specific ideas and beliefs about the schools in which they complete their student teaching experiences. Based on the nature of the student teaching experience and the school placement site, their beliefs and ideas can be modified or completely changed following the experience. It is clear that this study is preliminary to additional research into the beliefs of student teachers about rural schools and rural field placements. Several aspects of this study could be expanded to investigate other related areas regarding student teachers' beliefs about rural schools. The following topics are recommended areas for future investigative research.

Research with middle school and secondary education student teachers. This study could be extended to include information collected from middle school level (grade levels 6-8) and secondary education (grade levels 9-12) student teachers. Their pre- and post- experience beliefs could be compared to those student teaching at the elementary level. By examining the beliefs of student teachers at different grade levels, researchers may gain insights about how student teachers form beliefs based on their experiences and observations with students and teachers at other grade levels.

Examination of school curriculum. During this case study investigation, the participant obtained information mainly about the science curriculum implemented in the school. Examination of all subject areas contained in the school curriculum would provide information about the use and implementation of curricula in rural schools and could lead to a comparison

study of its implementation and use in urban school districts. A comparison study investigating how student teachers perceive and implement the school curriculum in a rural setting and in an urban setting would also contribute important information about the formation of student teacher beliefs.

Research with family and school collaboration. The participant in this study had little opportunity to observe and investigate the level of family and school collaboration during the seven week experience. Further study focusing on the role of families and their level of collaboration within rural and urban school communities would provide additional insights into the similarities and differences in both types of school settings. Active student teacher participation with families during the student teaching experience would greatly contribute to the development of positive attitudes and beliefs about family and school collaboration.

Teacher beliefs and job satisfaction. Research comparing rural and urban classroom teachers' beliefs about their school districts, materials, resources, technology, curriculum, and overall job satisfaction would provide additional information. Are urban school teachers more satisfied with their jobs than rural school teachers? Would rural school teachers desire to seek employment at urban schools? Would urban school teachers desire to seek employment at rural schools? What are current classroom teachers' beliefs about rural and urban schools? Case study investigations with teacher interviews would be effective strategies to collect data regarding these prospective research questions.

Concluding Thoughts

The results of this study provide insights into the beliefs of one student teacher about rural school placements. The participant's beliefs pre and post- experience were varied and the

participant modified some of his beliefs upon completion of the experience. The findings inform colleges and university teacher preparation programs about the teacher candidates they are preparing and the educational practice and experiences they encounter in some field placements. Rural and urban school settings provide important and unique learning experiences for student teachers and pre-student teachers. It is important to note that not all rural schools are the same. Rural schools in Mississippi may be drastically different from schools in rural Ohio or Indiana. The communities surrounding rural schools are also very diverse, so one must be careful not to make specific generalizations about all rural schools. Many urban and rural schools share common characteristics and challenges. College students are often unaware of the issues and challenges that are faced by all school districts unless they have the opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of school settings. It is essential for colleges and universities to provide students with opportunities to observe and discover a variety of diverse educational experiences in urban and rural school settings as they prepare themselves to be future educators.

Although this case study focused on the beliefs and ideas of one student teacher, it is difficult to generalize those ideas and reflections to all student teachers participating in their required field practicum and student teaching experiences. Each student teacher's individual backgrounds, prior school and field practicum experiences, exposure to rural and urban school districts, and the geographical locations of field placements all contribute to the formation of their beliefs of rural and urban school districts. Teacher preparation programs must acquaint students with the benefits and challenges faced by rural and urban schools in order to change misconceptions and help students to develop realistic and positive attitudes that will shape their instructional practices.

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Appendix A

Table A1

A Comparison of Pre-Experience Beliefs and Post-Experience Beliefs

School Characteristics	Pre-Experience Beliefs	Post-Experience Beliefs	X- Indicates a change in belief following the experience
School Appearance	+ Older school in need of some repairs and renovation.	+ Renovated, visually appealing, clean, good physical condition	X
Classroom Environment	+ Positive classroom environment + Small class sizes + Limited classroom resources	+ Positive classroom environment + Small class size + Variety of resources/materials	X
Cooperating Teacher	+ Veteran teacher who is "friendly and easy-going"	+ Veteran classroom teacher knowledgeable, friendly, and respected by the students	
Students	+ Few culturally diverse students + Students from low income families + Students with a variety of ability levels and needs + School may not provide appropriate services to meet student needs.	+ Few culturally diverse students + High number of students from single parent families + Students with a variety of abilities and needs + School provides appropriate services to meet student needs.	X - Belief about the school providing services to meet student needs was changed.
School Curriculum	+ Standards-based curriculum + Inquiry-based science curriculum + Differentiated curriculum for learning needs	+ Standards-based science curriculum + Inquiry-based science curriculum + Differentiated curriculum to meet needs + Did not have to opportunity to observe all academic curricula	
Technology & Resources	+ Limited instructional materials/resources + Basic computers most likely needing an upgrade	+ Large computer lab + Smart Board and updated technology in each classroom + Variety of instructional materials in computer lab and classroom + Grant money used to purchase current technology	X
School Faculty & Administration	+ Lower salaries for teachers and administrators + Higher turnover rate than urban schools + Similar responsibilities as administrators in urban schools	+ Principal taught at the school, before serving as principal. + Low turnover rate of teachers and principal + Majority of teachers and the principal had 7 or more years of service at the school	X