Objective

This purpose of this study is to contribute to current research on which kinds of teacher knowledge, attitudes, and experiences contribute in a positive way to the learning experiences of diverse students. Currently, a cultural mismatch exists between the diverse backgrounds of students in schools and the generally, white, middle-class urban teachers who teach them. This study asks specifically, does a Rural Practicum Experience for pre-service teachers positively impact their knowledge and attitudes about rural, Alaska Native students and families?

Perspectives

John Dewey suggests that if everyone in a society is an intelligent deliberator, then that society can start on a path towards social justice, a public good. According to Dewey (1938), this intelligent deliberation is gained through the experience of formal education. Further, this formal educative experience must be held in a context that the child relates to and understands. Many teachers today do not share the background and experiences of their students. This cultural mismatch negatively impacts the educational experience, (and learning, democracy and social justice), when teachers cannot compensate for the difference.

The literature establishes that the academic achievement of diverse students improves when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters - relevance matters. Dewey (1938) believed children engage with a school curriculum, and therefore learn best, when their education is personally meaningful. Dewey’s philosophical belief is supported by Piaget (1950), Erikson (1950), Montessori (1964), who demonstrate that learning is a complex process that results from the interaction of children's own thinking and experiences in the external world.

To further the idea of education as a public good, a goal of teacher education should be to produce teachers who can effectively develop intelligent deliberation in their young students.
By understanding and appreciating their student’s many cultures, and having the ability to use this knowledge to deliver a relevant curriculum, they can develop intelligent deliberators, setting them on a path of democracy and social justice.

**Literature**

Alaska’s rural schools are individually and collectively unique. They are also ‘inherently rural’ (Coladarci, 2007). They are small buildings, with small (10-200) student populations. They are isolated and attendance is dependent on the hunting and fishing schedules of the community. Alaska’s rural schools consist of 290 sites serving 34,151 students (State of Alaska, 2009). Rural Alaska with its severe isolation makes Alaska Natives the most disadvantaged minority among all ethnic minorities in terms of receiving educational opportunity (Chu and Culbertson, 1982).

The literature establishes that the academic achievement of diverse students improves when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996) - relevance matters. Gay tells us that when academic learning is made relevant for students, they show higher interest and learn more easily. Explicit knowledge about cultures of students is ‘imperative’ to meeting diverse students’ learning needs (Gay, 2002) and creating relevant learning experiences.

Piaget (1950), Erikson (1950), and Montessori (1964), demonstrate that learning is a complex process that results from the interaction of children's own thinking and experiences in the external world. This is particularly true for Alaska Native students. When teachers understand, appreciate, and implement Alaska Native communal and hands-on learning styles, naturalistic intelligences, and strong oral story telling traditions (Alaska Native Knowledge
Network 1999), the prior knowledge and experiences of rural students are accessed and learning improved.

Communities in Rural Alaska show a consistent pattern of out-migration since 1990 (State of Alaska, 2009). This migration out of small rural villages is a long term trend (Martin, Killorin, & Colt, 2008) with 60% of people migrating out of rural Alaskan villages reporting they are unlikely to return to the village (Martin et al.). Children who once attended small village schools enroll in large urban schools with teachers and staff who likely have little understanding of village life (O’Malley and Hopkins, 2008). The majority of teachers are white, middle-class, urban, and generally limited in their knowledge of or experience with diverse cultures (Sleeter, 2001). It is important then that pre-service teachers understand and appreciate the lives and educational backgrounds of the rural Alaska Native students who come to their urban classrooms.

**Data Sources**

Pre-service teachers completed the Pre-rural Practicum Questionnaire prior to their Rural Practicum experience. The questionnaire was given in a group setting, but participants were asked not to share their answers until all the questionnaires had been completed and collected. Two months later the pre-service teachers participated in The Rural Practicum Experience. During and immediately after, participants prepared a journal exercise in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, which they submitted to their program coordinator. Following the rural practicum experience, participants again completed the questionnaire in a group setting. In addition, pre-service teachers were individually interviewed about what they thought they had learned from the experience. A content analysis was done of the questionnaires, journals, and interviews.
Participants in this investigation are pre-service teachers in Master of Arts in Teaching Program at the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau, Alaska. The pre-service teachers participating in this project form a cohort group in an intensive one-year teacher preparation program consisting of thirty-seven coursework credits and five Internship credits. All program students participated in this research.

Forty-one participants completed Pre-rural Practicum and Post-rural practicum Questionnaires. I content analyzed the twenty completed PowerPoint journals and interviewed these same twenty pre-service teachers. The Pre-rural Practicum Questionnaire consists of open-ended questions that ask about teaching and living in a rural and/or isolated environment: Tell me about teaching in a rural school. Do you intend to apply for teaching positions in a rural school next year? Why or why not?

The Post-rural Practicum Questionnaire consists of the same open-ended questions. Participants were assigned to create a PowerPoint journal of their experiences. No further instructions about this activity were given.

I interviewed the participants following the rural practicum. Interviews lasted ten to twenty minutes and consisted of two questions: What did you learn from the experience and what did you learn about rural students?

**Conclusions**

Patterns discovered in the analysis of the Pre-rural Practicum Questionnaire demonstrate pre-service teachers shared some assumptions about rural students. In general, pre-service teachers held a deficit view, rather than a difference view, of rural Alaska Native students and viewed themselves as these students’ educational saviors. The majority of the responses on the
Pre-rural Practicum Questionnaire are broadly focused with comments made about schools, children, adults, and communities, and a general view of families as dysfunctional.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Theme</th>
<th>Representative Example Identified in Pre-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorly educated</td>
<td>“They have not had good teachers or resources; they lack the background knowledge and experiences to be successful in school.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are educational saviors</td>
<td>“I would need to expose village students to the cultural norms of the lower 48 and the rest of Alaska; this is a necessary and valuable skill for them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
<td>“There is a lot of alcoholism and child abuse. I can’t handle that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwelcoming</td>
<td>“I will be treated as an outsider and not accepted”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the rural practicum experience, pre-service teachers’ attitudes continued to take a deficit view. Their beliefs became more focused on teaching and learning, rather than the broader community. The belief that families are dysfunctional shifted to a belief that a culture of poverty predominates. On a positive note, the idea that rural Alaskans are unwelcoming or closed off did not appear dominantly in the post-test.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Theme</th>
<th>Representative Example Identified in Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poorly educated</td>
<td>“Teachers are teaching out in the bush because they could not get a job in the bigger cities.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are educational saviors</td>
<td>“The students who you might care about who are bright and show promise will bad choices because they have few options. They will go in a bad direction. All your hard work will be for nothing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
<td>“There are high suicide rates, alcoholism, and poor nutrition, so people don’t care about school.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants PowerPoint journals demonstrate the contradictions they experienced. Panoramic photos reveling in the stark beauty of the Alaska bush are interspersed with photos of beautifully appointed classrooms and smiling children. The photos were generally positive in
contrast to the negative tone of the picture captions. Picture captions talked about high absence rates, low parent participation, and a lack of community support of schools.

An analysis of interview responses yielded two general themes: pre-service teachers recognize the need to help rural student’s transitions to much larger and more structured urban school environments, and pre-service teachers questioned how they will respond to students and families from rural areas when they arrive in urban classrooms.

In this specific case, knowledge was improved, but attitudes and beliefs remained static. Pre-service teachers report (36 out of 41) that they intend to make particular effort and plans for rural students and their families when they arrive in their urban classrooms. Participants suggested they might create an orientation for students and families or assign new students from rural areas a buddy to help them during their transition.

**Significance**

The idea of the ‘teacher as an educational savior’ occurred throughout participants responses. Much of this attitude may be attributable to pre-service teacher fantasies about saving the world common among new teachers. Some of it may be attributable to the historical reality of Alaska, one of colonialism and the “white man’s burden”; some of it to the social privilege enjoyed by these mostly white, middle-class interns. Clearly there are implications for social justice in these kinds of comments. Will an “I would need to expose village students to the cultural norms of the lower 48 and the rest of Alaska; this is a necessary and valuable skill for them” attitude prevail in their classrooms or will they use their perceived ‘savior’ status to use their knowledge about relevance, experience, and cultural filters to provide outstanding educational experiences for their students?
This study focused on how and which kinds of teacher knowledge, attitudes, and experiences might be gained from a rural practicum experience that contribute in a positive way to the learning experiences of diverse students. Attitudes and beliefs about rural Alaska Native students do not appear to be changed by participation in this rural practicum experience. Attitudes influence what we notice, how we interpret information, and what we remember (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). People are especially likely to notice events that confirm their expectancies (illusory correlations), which leads them to overestimate the frequency of such confirmations (Stroessner & Plaks, 2001). People tend to see what they expect to see; this is demonstrated in the similarities in the pre- and post-test results. However, pre-service teachers did gain knowledge, and confidence, about how to respond to and support rural Alaska Native students in their urban classrooms.

In general, the responses of participants in this study support Sleeter (2001); that the effects of a fieldwork experience have mixed results. Haberman & Post (1992) and Reed (1993) found field experiences are interpreted through the preconceptions of the participants and often stereotypes are reinforced. Will longer and/or more consistent field experiences yield more attitude change or is there a component other than time that is necessary? Perhaps it is more effective to structure the experience in ways that force pre-service to recognize their cultural bias, privilege, and attitudes in order to purposefully and reflectively find evidence that contradicts their beliefs.

Is teacher knowledge enough to achieve a relevant experience for students that develops intelligent deliberation, democracy, and social justice or do attitudes and beliefs that run counter to the precepts of social justice prevent this, no matter how much a teacher ‘knows’?
References


