Teaching in the Country: A Critical Analysis of the Experiences of Rural Teachers in the United States and Jamaica

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Teaching in a rural community brings about challenges in many ways. Many of my students live in poverty. Their parents are not involved in participating in school events to in their home. Most of my students have never left the county. The biggest thing that ever happens for them is a trip to Wal-Mart. Therefore, in implementing technology in my classroom, I am able to take them on global 'trips' to see and learn more about life outside of our rural area. It's truly rewarding! **(Rural Teacher, United States, 2016, Interview)**

Being a teacher in (rural) Jamaica is an awesome task. The classroom sizes are large, integration of students with special education issues without assistance from government agencies. Parents and students are disrespectful. However, some parents and students place trust in teachers and work with you to help students achieve required skills. **(Rural Teacher, Jamaica, 2015, Interview)**

INTRODUCTION

Rural education and the experiences of rural teachers are important dimensions of the educational history of both the United States and Jamaica; both countries regularly acknowledge the contrasts between urban and rural education, but most research focuses on demographics and statistics related to levels of achievement, per pupil expenditures and school completion rates. Few studies look at the experiences of rural teachers and even fewer focus on the cross-cultural similarities among teachers working in rural schools. A review of articles and journals revealed a database "heavy" on rural education essays from the first half of the twentieth century, but very

little work done in the past fifty years. "Well over one hundred years ago, school reformers in the United States began to talk about what came to be known as the "rural school problem" (Kannapel and Deyoung, 1999; Tyack, 1972; cited in Schafft and Jackson, 2010, p. 1). And so, the "rural school problem" was popular fodder for scholarly essays at a time when significant numbers of students lived in rural communities. Time passed and as population centers were established in large urban and suburban communities, rural education became associated with a quaint aspect of "earlier times," and not surprisingly, rural schools were further isolated as an educational relic represented by pictures of the "little red schoolhouse" where both teaching and learning methods were defined as "not progressive" and more likely, backward and representative of how it "used to be." Research agendas focused on rural schools emphasized a lack of efficiency and progressivism in an age of modernity. Elwood Cubberly (1914, 1922) referred to rural schools as standing still and lacking the forward motion of urban schools that were exploding with growth reflecting the changing demographics and goals of twentieth century education. Challenges to these notions are hard to find. In the book, *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world*, edited by Kai A. Schafft and Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2010), an absence of contemporary research that considers the relationship of identity, place and community in rural communities is noted. While urban education if frequently mediated by ideological shifts that challenge the goals and purposes of schooling as a product of identity, place and community, twenty-first century rural education has not proven worthy of the same kinds of challenges to the status quo that would have produced critical scrutiny and an in-depth analysis of the unique qualities that define the rural experience. As such, explorations of the lives of rural teachers, are equally hard to find; rural schools are different, but questions about the people who teach in these schools and

discussions of their experiences are ignored. Most discussions of the profession focus on generic descriptions of teachers' work that ignore the qualities of rural schools that make teachers' lives and experiences different from their urban counterparts. Even the training of teachers for rural schools disregards the qualities of rural education that demand a critical ideology that challenges the unequal distribution of resources and paucity of teachers qualified to teach higher level classes in science and math. Fred Yeo (2001) found that, "the specialized knowledge taught in most of teacher education is geared toward the urban and devaluing of the rural. This is often the case even in colleges of education located in predominantly rural areas. All too often, teacher education sustains understandings of perceived inadequacies of rural schools by failing to note either the difference in community-oriented cultural values or the problematic of impoverished resources resulting from discriminatory state funding allocations which give rise to differential educational measurements" (p. 518). Twenty-first century schools have historically focused upon measures of success that are objective, efficient and promote consolidation of resources; bigger may not be better, but small is equated with higher costs and unwieldy bureaucratic structures that would be more appropriate for the management of small industrial complexes, not small schools in isolated, sparsely populated communities.

First, however, I have to consider how rural education became a part of my life. I am a "city girl;" I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee, I knew nothing about rural life or living in the country during the first half of my life. The streets were my playground and working-class neighborhoods of small houses built on top of each other were the norm. I never hung out in the woods and the wildest animals I knew anything about were the domestic pets in my home; dogs and cats. Our schools were behemoth concrete jungles built in the late 1940s to serve the needs of burgeoning populations of children. We had trees, but no gardens. I didn't know what a trailer

looked like; poor people lived in projects. And parks were the only places where you went to find nature. My grandparents did occasionally take me to a lake in rural Arkansas to fish, but I didn't know how to swim; all of the pools in Memphis were closed because of the threat that desegregation might ultimately mean that Blacks and Whites would swim in the same water. All I knew about rural life was related to stereotypes that I encountered in popular media representations on television; *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres* and *Petticoat* Junction were my guides to rural life. I was left to assume that people who live in the country, talk and act "funny" and that while they may be smart, it wasn't "book smart," it was "street smart;" they knew how to survive on the land and in the woods. So, life took an interesting turn and twenty-three years ago I moved to a small town in western North Carolina. I took a job at a university in a rural Appalachian community in the mountains which included in my responsibilities the opportunity to regularly teach in various communities across the island of Jamaica. Previously, I had only worked in urban communities and now I was training teachers to work in rural schools. Initially, I thought that the differences were negligible, teaching is teaching, but I was very wrong. As I visited rural schools and encountered the myriad accents and the poorly resourced classrooms, I knew that I needed to be preparing teachers to adapt. Students challenged the urban educational literature that I used, and while there were similarities between poor city kids and poor country kids, there were also profound differences. Overnight, I was reminded that we must always be teachers AND learners; I had a lot to learn about teaching in the country, and thus, began a journey that has lasted twenty-three years.

My work as a teacher educator was enriched by my work in the rural communities of western North Carolina, but also by the time I have spent visiting and working in Jamaica. My work in Jamaica each year can be brief, 2-3 weeks per course, but in some years I have spent the

equivalent of 3-4 months on the island teaching multiple courses in different locales. Working with teachers in both North Carolina and Jamaica transformed the ways that I thought about teaching and learning. The rural communities in both countries are quite different, and yet, there are unexpected similarities. Teachers in both North Carolina and Jamaica experience the impact of negative stereotypes, lack of resources, isolation and exclusion, in addition to challenges associated with recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers who view rural schools as undesirable. This chapter will critically examine issues associated with rural education generally, but more specifically discuss the experiences of teachers in the rural communities of North Carolina and Jamaica.

A PLACE CALLED RURAL

The work of the rural school is no longer to emulate the urban or suburban school, but to attend to its own place" (Theobald and Nachtigal, 1995, p. 132). While much of my work in the social foundations of education had focused on the issues that affect teachers working in urban environments, I quickly discovered that there was a richness and complexity to rural life that intersected with the urban experience, but yet, was completely different; a different place. My introduction to rural life was not an easy transition; I was forced to re-evaluate all of the stereotypes I had about life in rural communities. I quickly came to realize that the issues I was confronting in the rural communities I visited everyday were complicated due to the fact that not only did geography define the rural experience, but more importantly, there was a significant role played in how local culture, history, values and beliefs intersected with the public school experience.

My earlier training in qualitative research methods focused on emic and etic perspectives, and in this environment, I became keenly aware of the chasm between insider and outsider views

of life in the country. In the rural communities where I have worked, there was an acknowledgement of the difficulties attached to rural life, but simultaneously, there was an honoring of the family/community traditions, history, values and beliefs that have defined their lives. Most parents had attended, and played sports, in the same schools their children now attended. There was a continuity to this experience, and despite challenges to the adequacy of the schools, parents often don't want anything to change. From a distance, from the outside, I am also able to see how the negative stereotypes as well as the isolation and exclusion that were associated with notions of rurality had impacted education and the lives of teachers in rural schools in unique ways. Rural sociologists, Schwarzeller and Brown (1962) claim that in Appalachia, "the school is the primary or only cultural bridge between regional subcultures and the national culture" (cited in DeYoung, A.J., 1995, p. 174). As such, the school assumes an even more important role in the lives of rural communities, a role with added dimensions not evident in urban schools and one with unexplored purposes and goals. A critical analysis of the role a "cultural bridge" plays for teachers in rural schools is worthy of consideration.

Definitions of rural are confusing at best. Researcher Mike Arnold with the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory observed the following, "We do need a better definition of 'rural' and the different kinds of 'rural.' "There is 'poor rural' and 'wealthy rural.' There's 'rural' with no minorities, and 'rural' with high minorities. There's 'rural' with high limited English proficiency....[and] big rural communities versus small rural communities. In some parts of the country a community of 20,000 might be considered rural while, in most of the Great Plains, that would be a major community." In the same report, it was documented that in the school year 2010-11, over half of all operating regular school districts and about one-third of all public schools were in rural areas, while about one-quarter of all public school students were

enrolled in rural schools (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, n.p.). On January 5th, 2016, *The Atlantic*, ran an essay by Rachel Martin entitled, "Salvaging Education in Rural America." Rachel Martin describes the following situation in America:

> When teachers, theorists, and pundits analyze America's educational system, they usually focus on urban centers, but rural school systems make up more than half of the nation's operating school districts, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Like many of their urban peers, children there fight to overcome scant funding, generational poverty, rampant malnutrition, and limited job prospects. (n.p.)

When discussing rural education with teachers in both Jamaica and the United States, two ideas regularly emerge: the notion of challenges and the idea that there are both good and bad things associated with rural education; comparisons with urban counterparts are frequently noted. A 1994 report by the U.S. Department of Education is still valid over twenty years later, rural schools and rural school districts are different from than urban schools in many important ways:

- Rural school and rural school districts usually enroll small number of pupils (i.e., fewer than 1,000 pupils per school district).
- Rural school districts commonly are experiencing significant enrollment decline.
- Rural residents report incomes significantly less than their urban and suburban peers.
- Rural school districts usually employ school buildings that house smaller numbers of pupils.
- Rural school districts typically are sparsely populated.
- Due primarily to small numbers of pupils generally located large geographic areas, per-pupil transportation costs for total schools inordinately high.

- Due to the absence of significant trading centers, rural school districts often are nearly exclusively dependent on real property taxations for their local revenue. (Stern, 1994, p. 48)

Not surprisingly, teachers in both the United States and Jamaica, discuss the challenges associated with being rural; exclusion and isolation as well as a lack of resources both in the school and the community are frequently mentioned. And yet, at the same time, teachers talk about the rewards of providing important services as a role model, mentor and teacher to students and communities where they are needed. This sense of "doing good," however, is mediated by the difficulties associated with working in schools where the work can be hard and the resources limited. However, recent statistics do demonstrate that that the "bad" associated with rural education is often balanced by many qualities that reinforce a sense of difference that is at times neutral and at other times, quite good:

- In rural areas, 71 percent of public school students were White, 10 percent were Black, 13 percent were Hispanic, 2 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 percent were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 percent were of two or more races.
- However, a larger percentage of rural children lived in poverty than suburban children (19 vs. 15 percent). There were regional differences in the percentages of rural children living in poverty in 2010. The percentage of rural children living in poverty was highest in the South, at 22 percent, followed by the West (20 percent), Midwest (15 percent), and Northeast (12 percent).
- On average, public school students in rural areas perform better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than their peers in cities and towns but generally not as well as their peers in suburban areas.

- Students in rural districts experienced higher graduation rates than their peers in districts in cities and towns. Nationally, during the 2008-09 school year (the latest year for which these data are available), the averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) for the 47 states that reported data (California, Nevada, and Vermont did not) and the District of Columbia was 77 percent (see the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) Rural Education in America website). The rate was higher in rural areas (80 percent) than across the 47 reporting states and the District of Columbia. The rate was also higher in rural areas than in cities (68 percent) and towns (79 percent) but was lower than the rate in suburban areas (81 percent). (National Center on Education Statistics, 2013, n.p.)

Stern (1994) also noted that "another problem concerns stereotypical images of rural life that inhibit understanding the wide diversity that exists not only across regions of the country but even within states" (p. 48).

As noted earlier, stereotypical images of rural life in popular culture representations are often the only knowledge that "outsiders" have of what it means to be rural. Recently, I looked at popular culture images of life in the southern United States, a large geographic area frequently referred to as rural despite many large urban areas. These popular culture characterizations, included images from shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies, Green Acres* and *Petticoat Junction,* as well as more contemporary images from *Honey Boo Boo*, *Duck Dynasty*, and *Moonshiners*. While many may view the images in these programs as benign and harmless, they regularly presented rural communities as places where language, values and beliefs are contrary to a more regulated norm, and more importantly, a place where intelligence can be defined as a special kind of knowledge and truth that emerges from life experiences, not education. "Outsiders" frequently refer to individuals who live in rural communities as hicks, white trash, yokels and

hillbillies; terms that are most often used generically without any understanding of how rural residents might define or understand the use of this language. In this previous work, I observed the following about "hickality" television:

> Television programming in the 21st century provides an entirely different twist on Southern life as a focus of entertainment. Tired of fictional accounts of life in the South, these reality shows are being characterized as "hickality" television programming (Bass, 2013). And yet, unsurprisingly, the themes are similar to those from Hooterville: It's ok to be ignorant, and often obnoxious, but there is a native intelligence among those from the rural South that endows them with an air of superiority despite their marginalized and often disenfranchised status in the rest of the world. From *Honey Boo Boo* to *Moonshiners* to *Duck Dynasty*, although the themes of these shows are different and their stories distinctive, the message is still the same: The South is a place where academic knowledge is viewed with disdain, and it is really cool if one is smart about the workings of the real world, and proficient in turning this "special knowledge" into profit. Turn on the television in the United States, Canada, and even the Caribbean and you can see a variety of programs that showcase "hick" culture in the United States—people living on farms, residing in simple homes (or trailers), speaking grammatically incorrect English, sometimes struggling to make ends meet, eating fast food, and celebrating a Southern way of life while laughing all the way to the bank with the money made from this fascination with Southern life as a freak show. In many places, "hickality" shows are accompanied by subtitles that imply, of course, that Southern accents are the equivalent of a foreign dialect, so perhaps

> one does need a passport to come down south. This is the love affair du jour for television viewers. And while "there doesn't seem to be one word to encompass this group of people or their lifestyle that isn't incredibly offensive: white trash, hillbilly, redneck, yokel . . . their presence in American pop culture has multiplied over the last few television seasons, and it doesn't seem to be dying down. (Bass, 2013, n.p.; cited in Blair, 2015, pp. 138-139)

Images of rural life in contemporary popular culture television programs continue to proliferate. "In dozens of shows — ranging from *Hillbilly Handfishing* and *Swamp People* to *Bayou Billionaires*, *Rocket City Rednecks* and *American Hoggers* — sons (and daughters) of the South make moonshine, chase wild hogs, stuff dead pets, carve duck calls, wrestle alligators, catch catfish with their bare hands, mess around in swamps and generally hoot and holler. While these shows often play it for laughs by highlighting the antics of their rural stars, TV executives say the shows also appeal to viewers who want to see regular folks on television" (Catlin, 2012, n.p.) Catlin's definitions of "regular folks" is open to debate; however, he provides assurances from Marjorie Kaplan, president and general manager of Animal Planet, home to the popular *Hillbilly Handfishing*. that "these shows are not painting people in a derogatory way, because they're affectionate. I think some people see themselves in the show, but for others it's reflective of an iconic way of life. The shows are popular because of 'the desire to connect back to something that's a little more raw and a little bit more real,' Kaplan says. "And hillbillies are the epitome of that — no artifice, living in the moment, the real deal" (Catlin, 2012, n.p.). I am not sure when rural life became synonomous with hillbillies and hicks or when assumptions were made that ruralites live in the moment, but somehow I don't find these images affectionate portrayals of rural life. These popular culture images are a part of a rural identity. While some may find them

liberating, others might find them limiting. When discussing the experiences of teachers in rural communities, stereotypical images that define education and schooling in ways that limit rather expand global connections, reality often becomes destiny. Too much critique breeds contempt from those who find these images "affectionate," however, the images are disturbing. The formation of a rural identity involves constructions that affirm values and beliefs and reify a history, politics and culture that perpetuate a way of life that is not often subject to the scrutiny it deserves.

TEACHING IN THE COUNTRY: THE UNITED STATES

> ***Teaching is not what I expected. When I grew up in rural West Virginia and went to school. I remember what teachers did and I remember the role that they played. There was pride in teaching. High School teachers were looked at as leaders in the community and people that you looked up to. Those days are gone. People feel and I didn't realize this until I was teaching, it's kind of degrading to say, "I'm a high school teacher." You have to say it under your breath. I used to think people had a lot of respect for high school teachers, but I feel that they don't anymore. It's just a guy who wants to teach school is just the attitude I gen now. That's kind of an embarrassment to me because I do enjoy it.*** **(High School Teacher, United States, Interview)**

Teachers in both urban and rural communities suffer from the various problems that afflict the profession; lack of status, low pay, limited autonomy. Alexandra Ossola (2014) found that rural schools face very different problems from urban schools, "In the 2010-2011 school year, rural students made up about a quarter of all students enrolled in public schools in the United States.

These rural districts tend to be less wealthy than urban or suburban ones, so facilities and infrastructure are limited. Transportation costs are higher because students live farther away. Fewer students are enrolled in each school, which means that, when administrators apply for federal grants to pay for technology and special education classes, they don't have enough clout to make a difference. While the educators don't necessarily strive to send every kid to college, they are working hard to give students a sufficient understanding of STEM topics as a baseline for future work and education" (Ossola, 2014, n.p.). Complicating these issues are the difficulties associated with recruitment, retention and staffing. Finding teachers willing to locate to rural, isolated communities is difficult; principals will often resort to creative ways to find teachers licensed and willing to work in rural schools The public recognizes the important role played by teachers in American education; however, there is a lack of support for widespread reform that would impact teachers in both urban and rural communities. While the privatization of schools and school choice have impacted the structure and delivery of education in urban communities in myriad ways that are not all good, rural schools have been impervious to change. Small school size and limited resources seem to have led to schools that seem "frozen in time." Recent research on teaching in rural schools reveals the following facts:

> As of 2008, the National Center for Education Statistics reported an estimated 7,757 rural school districts across the country, with about 11.3 million students enrolled in primary or secondary rural schools. The NCES offers a table of the percentages of public primary and secondary schools with teaching vacancies in different subjects. The table shows high percentages of job vacancies in rural schools in subjects ranging from special education to vocational education. Furthermore, after the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools were

> met with new requirements and standards to increase the quality of education. The act required states to, among other educational reforms, guarantee that every teacher is qualified in their subject area. All core classes (science, history, math, English, etc.) are required to be taught by qualified teachers. Qualifications entail the necessary degrees and certifications for teachers mandated by the Department of Education, and for rural schools, this demand proves difficult. The act set deadlines for schools to institute a plan that ensures their teachers are "highly qualified." The jobs are there: rural schools need teachers, and if you're looking to make a tangible difference and have a lasting impact on students' lives, you should consider teaching at a rural school. It's true, the average salary of teachers in rural schools is less than in other areas, with base salaries ranging from $44,000 for teachers with a bachelor's degree, to $51,600 with a doctorate. But then again, the cost of living in these areas is also lower. Teaching in a rural area may also pose other difficulties for teachers. Rural schools face challenges in attracting and retaining teachers and administrators, limited financial resources and issues with long-distance transportation. (Teach Make a Difference, n.d., n.p.)

In contrast to their urban counterparts, however, the news for rural teachers is not all bad. A March, 2015, report entitled, *The Supply and Demand for Rural Teachers*, Daniel Player found that, "rural teachers report participating in slightly fewer professional development opportunities, although this is not clear whether it is because such opportunities are not available or not of interest. However, rural teachers report more control over the teaching that occurs in their classrooms and somewhat greater influence in school policy than urban teachers. Overall, rural teachers appear to be among the most satisfied with their jobs, but report lower satisfaction with

their salaries" (p. 23). Teaching in the country is different, and as noted earlier, the best descriptions of the experience discuss challenges occurring within a context of both strengths and weaknesses. Important to this discussion, however, is a consideration of how to best understand this experience from a critical perspective. For American teachers, the issues of teaching in the country are wrapped up in the complex mythology and stereotypes that shape conceptions of a rural identity. Yes, poverty, isolation and exclusion contribute to this identity, but it is important for teachers to challenge themselves and their students to consider the impact of these factors on their ability to gain access to the same kinds of educational experiences of teachers and learners in more urban, adequately resourced, main-stream environments. Access and choice become key pieces of this critical analysis of schools. Paulo Freire (1993) argued that "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (p. 72). Encouraging a critical consciousness of rural education would initiate an in-depth examination of both the social and political contradiction inherent in rural versus urban schools.

TEACHING IN THE COUNTRY: JAMAICA

> ***I would want others to know that despite the lack of resources, bad working conditions, being underpaid and neglected by the government we are still making a difference and doing the best with what we have because we love our jobs*. (Rural Teacher, Jamaica, 2015, Interview)**

Stephanie Folk (2001) described Jamaican rural life in the following, "The housing in rural areas is not much better than that found in the slum towns of the city. The advantage to living in the country is that you are living close to nature and housing conditions do not really make a difference. Many of the houses found in rural Jamaica are known as "wattle and daub"

dwellings. They are houses built with sticks, covered with wattle, plastered with clay and a little cement, and then whitened with lime. Thatch palms typically cover the roof. Only one forth of these houses has electricity or running water" (Folk, 2001, n.p.). Recent findings from the National Education Inspectorate (NEI) (2015) indicate that "schools located in the urban areas of Jamaica are far ahead of their rural counterparts in key areas which were used to assess schools. These areas included leadership and management, teaching and support for students' learning, students' progress in English and mathematics, students' personal and social development, use of human and material resources, curriculum and enhancement programmes and safety, security, health and wellbeing" (n.p.). In conclusion;

> The findings of the NEI baseline report echoes research conducted by founder and director of the Institute for Educational Administration and Leadership-Jamaica (IEAL-J) and Reader in Education at Brunel University in the United Kingdom, Professor Paul Miller. Miller, in a research paper published in 2014, argued that schools located outside of the immediate reach of the central officers of the Ministry of Education, what he calls the centre, are generally under-resourced and do not have sufficient support for principals. ("Rural Schools Underperforming—NEI Report," 2015, n.p.)

While the official motto of Jamaica is, "Out of Many People, One People," this motto while reflecting admirable goals needed to maintain peace and stability among a diverse population, it obscures the vast differences in ethnicity that exist in Jamaica. Jamaicans include people of African, European, Arabic (Lebanese descendants known as "Syrians"), Chinese, and East Indian descent. Equally important is the other motto frequently associated with Jamaicans, "No problem, Mon." Phrases like this and "No pressure, no problem" reflect the carefree, happy-go-lucky spirit of the Jamaican people, but once again ignores the dire circumstances that define the

lives of many people living in poverty, both rural and urban communities. "It is significant that for most Jamaicans there is a distinction between "town" and "country". Country people are thought to be good and town people are thought to be bad" (Folk, 2001, n.p.).

Similar to the United States, in Jamaica, teachers in rural schools face problems that are complex, mulit-dimensional and not easily solved. In many rural schools, teachers teach in multi-grade classrooms where one teacher serves the needs of students at several different grade levels, "multi-grade schools exist in many countries and play an important role in providing access to education for children in isolated and underdeveloped rural areas….The typically low student population at some of these rural schools contributes to their multi-grade status, as the Ministry of Education, more often than not, discourages the employment of new teachers, since teachers are engaged based on the size of the student population at a school" ("Three classes, one classroom, one teacher," 2011, n.p.). However, in Jamaica, the multi grade classrooms are frequently over-crowded and combine students with varying degrees of learning and behavioral challenges with average students. This results in teachers who are frustrated and quickly burn-out; one Jamaican principal noted that, "our problem is resources, the resources are limited, because we do not get anything extra from the ministry. (We get) the same as other schools, because you know that schools are paid per student in terms of grants….additional resources such as computers and special educators would help his school to enrich its offerings to the students….it takes special teachers to operate in multi-grade schools. It is at that level that the child is either made or broken. If the teacher does not understand how to operate in a multigrade setting, you are going to find that the teacher becomes frustrated and the students then become frustrated" ("Three Classes, One Classroom, One Teacher," 2011, n.p.). Teaching in the country in Jamaica is further complicated by the high rates of absenteeism, illiteracy and lack of resources that are

frequently documented ("Illiteracy Rising in Rural Schools," 2010, n.p.; Cook and Ezenne, 2010). Marianne McIntosh Robinson associated with the TEACH Caribbean programme observed that "Maths and English are foundation competencies which students need to move forward; however, many children continue to face serious challenges with the subjects. And our students, particularly in our rural institutions, do not always get the same attention as those in urban schools with similar challenges" ("Rhodes Scholars Focus on Rural Schools," 2015, n.p.).

And finally, just as teachers in rural communities in America struggle with issues related to non-standard dialects and accents, similar problems exist in Jamaica. ""Although, Standard Jamaican English (SJE) is the official language of Jamaica, many school children tend to speak Jamaican Creole, which is often the language of the home, playground, and churches. Jamaican Creole is derived from the languages of the colonizers and the colonized and is considered low in language status and prestige. Standard Jamaican English is closely associated with the upper- and middle-classes and has more prestige and status. This language structure is aligned with Standard British English and is often acquired through education" (Evans, 2001; cited in Williams and Staulters, 2010, pp. 98-99). Additionally, just as many rural schools struggle with recruitment, retention and qualifications of teachers, the training of rural Jamaica teachers is often limited and inadequate. Williams and Staulters (2010) noted that, "regardless of teaching improvement policies, many educators in Jamaica, especially in the rural communities, continue to be trained at the teacher college level. Given the dire need to raise educational standards, particularly in rural areas" (Warrican, Down, and Spencer-Ernandez, 2008; cited in Williams and Staulters, 2010) the relationship between teacher training and educational achievement becomes paramount. With the majority of educators trained at the initial level of teacher preparation, one must consider how educators are meeting the demands of educating the disenfranchised members of their communities. For example, what instructional strategies do teachers employ in raising the literacy rate of their Creole-speaking population?" (p. 99). These kinds of problems in country schools are frequently acknowledged in

Jamaican newspapers with calls for school reform and improvement, and yet, change is slow to come and country schools due to small size and remote location are seldom a high priority.

CONCLUSION: RURAL TEACHERS, RURAL LEADERS

In summary, the problems that afflict rural teachers in BOTH Jamaica and the United States fall into the following six areas:

1. Teacher recruitment
2. Teacher retention
3. Teacher licensure in STEM subjects
4. Lack of access to technology
5. Negative stereotypes attached to language and culture
6. Lack of resources

Related to these problems are the issues of salary, status and autonomy that afflict the profession generally. However, these problems are also the foundation for problems unique to rural schools; student related problems of absenteeism, multi grade classrooms, and low rates of literacy and college attendance. There are no simple answers for complex problems; each of the aforementioned issues requires a thorough understanding of the problem before we seek to generate solutions. Obviously, resource allocation is not adequate, but the underlying reasons for the inequitable distribution of resources require critical analysis and an ideological shift that makes social justice a priority. The choices available to rural teachers and their students are limited by place and identity; their attempts to prepare for a global marketplace are restricted by the local marketplace. School reform in both Jamaica and the United States focuses on testing and accountability while attempts to scrutinize what actually happens in schools and classrooms

are thwarted by adults more concerned with political agendas and bottom line economics than the efforts of teachers who devote their lives to doing the impossible: preparing students to function in a world very different from the one we currently live in.

My teacher education students in both Jamaica and western North Carolina are equally brilliant; I have spent twenty-three years learning about the culture, values and beliefs that inform and shape their lives. I have learned about their dreams and about their willingness to envision a future that is tenuous, at best, considering their limited resources. I have also learned about the courage required to "push" past the confines of racism, poverty and stereotypes that attempt to define one's intelligence by language and culture. I appreciate the closeness and interconnectedness of their communities; the sense of community and strong identity. Stephanie Folk's description of rural schools is not an exception; I have visited too many schools in Jamaica with overcrowded classrooms and no running water; I have also come to appreciate the sense of exclusion and isolation that permeate the rural experience; and yet, simultaneously melds a community together in a mutual sense of strength and identity. While rural North Carolina schools may not face the same kinds of physical plant issues, the schools are often run-down and neglected. In too many poor rural schools, I enter and immediately feel as though I have arrived at a place that is simply forgotten; these schools are not a part of anyone's conversation about meaningful school reform. I still remember vividly a school that I visited in Westmoreland, Jamaica, where upon driving up to the school with colleagues, I heard the children yelling, "white people, white people" and running into the building to hide. I was never given a satisfactory explanation for the reaction of these students, but I was struck by the fact that these children were so isolated and their experiences in the world so limited that a vision of white people arriving at the school was accompanied by panic and fear. Who did they think we

were? What were we going to do to them? I will never know the answers to these questions, but I know that these children were not being prepared to move beyond their colonial history and take their places in a global society where the intersection of poverty, racism and politics in the public educational arena must be critically analyzed; it is imperative that teachers find connections with an advocacy ideology that informs and leads this movement while simultaneously transforming the lives and work of rural teachers. The words of McLaren and Giroux (1990) still ring true today,

> Central to the conception of a critical pedagogy for rural schooling is the relationship between authority and the responsibility of leadership. We believe that teachers must wield authority in the interests of creating conditions for students and others to eventually exercise it with an equal sense of its importance as the basis for critical agency and dialogic learning. In this sense teachers must constantly reflect on the use of their own authority as part of a pedagogy of place. This means understanding the epistemological limits of their position so that they can be open to other arguments. It means understanding the limits of the forms of ethical address they use to construct particular narratives that frame relationships between self and others. It also means understanding how their own location within institutional structures positions them in the service of power. At the same time, teachers need to subvert power's most oppressive features. Hence, the notion of teachers as critical and public intellectuals is not a call to a limited notion of critical rationality, it is an epistemological, ethical, and experiential form of address that lends itself to creating social relations steeped in a sense of justice, compassion, radical empathy, and civic courage. (p. 163)

In earlier work, I argued that it was a sense of differentness that defined the rural southern experience. And indeed, a consideration of popular culture images of the South reinforced the notion that life in southern communities is rural and that it is defined by a language, culture and set of values that are different, even if those qualities are portrayed as both negative and positive; sometimes enviable and at other times despised. However noble the work of rural teachers may be, it is not easy work; teachers who persevere despite the frustrations find limited rewards and frequently negotiated outcomes; they are the heroes in this struggle for equity and opportunity for our most vulnerable students. The negative images of rural communities and their inhabitants do ultimately impact rural education and the lives of teachers in rural communities; the link between our laughter at parodies of rural life and the allocation of resources for rural schools is, unfortunately, too clear. Teachers are transformative leaders and change agents in their communities and rural schools are the keys to change; changing the content and context of teachers' work is the first step towards understanding the progress of change. McLaren and Giroux (1990) noted that with regard to rural schools and teachers, the following needs to occur:

> A critical pedagogy for rural schooling needs to be understood and practiced in a way that redefines how teachers view their role as cultural agents. Cultures occur to the extent that students and teachers live them. Consequently, it is as important to pay attention to the contraditions and disharmonies within cultures as it is to their appearances of uniformity and consensus. The cultural field of the school should not be viewed as a monadic site of harmony and control but rather as a site of disjuncture, rupture, and contradiction-a point which we tried to underscore in the story about our local high school. We want to argue that school culture is better understood as the loci of multivalent voices and powers as well as competing interests. Rural teachers need to

> disturb the popular assurance of received orthodoxies about the cultural fields that inform the classrooms where they teach. They must resist embracing monocultural views of democratic society that privilege the ideology of the dominant white culture. (p. 164)

The culture of rural communities and schools are defined by the values and beliefs that reflect the unique characteristics of the geography that shapes their differentness. However, in and of itself, this differentness is not bad or less or negative in any way; rural diversity offers us a chance to critically examine the many ways that our perceptions of intelligence and ability are tempered by narrow conceptions of education and schooling. The challenge for teachers working in rural schools and communities is the preservation of rural values and identity while also embracing the types of reforms that will give students access to the knowledge and skills needed to navigate a rapidly expanding world where the exclusion and isolation of rural schools is unacceptable and demands for inclusion take priority in the public discourse regarding the future of 21st century schools; all schools, all students involved in meaningful and sustainable change.

In conclusion, Alan J. DeYoung and Barbara Kent Lawrence (1995) asked important questions in their essay entitled, *On Hoosiers, Yankees, and Mountaineers,*

> Throughout rural America for almost a century and in urban America for more than 30 years, we have been exhorted to achieve magical world-class standards in the competition for global markets, as if succeeding in such an arena is an end in itself or can ever be completely accomplished. Meanwhile, some important questions have gotten lost. Is formal schooling only a matter of more and better instruction? Is the real purpose of the school to supply workers and consumers for a national economy, regardless of other human and social costs? Whom does the school serve, and whom might it serve if

> building communities rather than careers were to become the aim of education reform? And what price do we pay by educating students to flee the communities that nurtured them? We believe that these are worthy questions to ponder and to act upon. (p. 112)

These questions are appropriate for both Jamaican and American teachers. Ultimately, the answers will require rural teaching to be synonymous with rural leadership; leadership that is grounded in critical analysis and builds leadership capacity in the school and community. Central to these efforts will be a recognition of the close relationship between rural education and an understanding of rural as a place. Rural teachers acting as leaders in rural schools and communities must lead efforts to articulate a collective challenge to the benign neglect, isolation and exclusion that threaten the viability and integrity of rural education. The problems and issues that impede the progress of rural education were not born in rural communities, but rather they originated in public spaces where decisions are being made regarding both the training of teachers, the allocation of resources, and the goals and purposes of education in the absence of any serious regard for the differences between urban, suburban and rural schools. Rural schools suffer from invisibility; they are ignored because the public agenda focuses attention and resources on urban/suburban schools that have more visibility and capture the public imagination regarding "doable" school reform that produces quick, easily documented results for the largest number of students. In many instances, the impact of the neglect of rural schools has been so devastating that efforts to turn around these schools will require a long-term commitment to communities that have been excluded from having a voice in school reform efforts. These efforts accompanied by a renewed focus on the needs of rural teachers working in rural schools have the potential to change the landscape of rural education.

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