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Supporting Urban-Oriented Teacher Candidates to Experience Rural Schooling: The Story of a Virtual Adapted Practicum

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Abstract: In the fall of 2020, due to the institutional impacts of COVID-19, the Master of Teaching Program in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (Canada) transitioned to a modified practicum program. In this article, I draw on self-study (Kitchen et al., 2020) to examine and share my experiences as a Practicum Advisor tasked to design and deliver a four-week virtual practicum program for 30 teacher candidates, without access to high school classrooms. I reflect on how my rural teacher and researcher selves informed my practicum design in one of Canada's largest urban faculties of education, including teacher candidates' development of data portraits based on one rural case study high school. A virtual adapted practicum presented me with a narrow opening, in an otherwise urban-dominant curriculum, to expand teacher candidates' gaze beyond the metropolis.

Introduction

The Master of Teaching (MT) Program in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto leads to a graduate level degree and recommendation for teacher certification in the province of Ontario (Canada). As with many faculties of education across the country, the MT Program fully transitioned its classes to virtual teaching and learning in the spring of 2020 because of health restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Many school boards in the province were in tumult with staffing shortages and there was considerable movement between face-to-face and virtual student enrollments across schools. Owing to our pandemic circumstances, it was not possible to secure school-based practicum experiences, in-person or virtual, for all MT teacher candidates (TCs) in the fall of 2020. The pandemic shift posed significant challenges and opportunities to how the Program planned practicum experiences for its preservice teachers.

In this article, I utilize self-study (Kitchen at al., 2020) to share and reflect on my experience as a teacher educator tasked to develop and implement a fully virtual, four-week adapted practicum for 30 Intermediate-Senior (Grades 7-12) TCs. Self-study is a reflexive endeavor that aims to improve teacher education through intentional inquiry to yield knowledge about practice (Ikpeze, 2019). I found myself at an extraordinary moment in my education career with an opportunity to redefine the professional experience. The main question guiding my self-study asked: *What am I learning about the possibilities of a virtual adapted practicum to support urban-oriented teacher candidates to experience rural schooling?* The goal of this article is to explore what I understood about my capacity – as a rural education practitioner and researcher

working in an urban faculty of education – to shape alternative approaches to practicum, given the virtual opportunities created by the pandemic.

I begin with a brief review of research literature that explores the role of practicum in initial teacher education (ITE) programs. Next, to provide context, I outline the response to our pandemic circumstances leading to an adapted virtual practicum in the MT Program in November 2020. I then provide an overview of self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) as my guiding methodology. I reflect on how my rural teacher and researcher *selves* informed the development of my adapted practicum curriculum in one of Canada's largest urban faculties of education. I describe how TCs scaffolded their development of data portraits based on one rural case study high school, as part of developing habits of instructional design. Finally, I reflect on what I learned about the possibilities to inspire urban-aspiring TCs (and teacher educators) to value complexities of teaching and learning in rural school settings.

Literature Review: Practicum (Practice) in Teacher Education

Various terminology applies to the phrase *practice teaching*. For example, North American teacher educators tend to refer to practice teaching in pre-service programs as the *practicum, internship,* or *field experience*. My Australian colleagues will likely speak of the *professional experience* (e.g., Forgasz, 2017). As this self-study took place in Ontario, Canada, I will refer to the practicum throughout the article to reflect my faculty context.

The practicum is a significant element in ITE programs to prepare teacher candidates for classroom teaching and presumably offers sound pedagogical learning. Darling-Hammond and Baratz-Snowden (2005) refer to these field experiences as "the most pervasive pedagogy in teacher education" (p. 42). Teacher candidates seem to agree with this description, citing practicum as one of the most valued and appreciated learning experiences in their teacher training (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; Martin, 2017; Russell 2017). Despite its prevalence in ITE programs across the globe, and its apparent significance in the experiences of preservice teachers, practicum – goals, models, and impacts – continues to be an undertheorized area of teacher education.

The practicum tends to be associated with a brick and mortar "in-school experience" (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008, p. 32). In Ontario, such field experiences likely depend on a triad relationship between a preservice student, an in-service mentor teacher (or host) active in a school setting, and an advisor (or supervisor) associated with the ITE program (e.g., a university instructor, or a retired educator) (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Lawson et al. (2015) also acknowledges the vital role students play in supporting preservice teachers' learn-to-teach experiences. Supportive mentoring relationships clearly matter in shaping preservice teachers' learning, as does embeddedness in a school setting. Mattsson et al. (2011) suggest that a teaching practicum emphasizes "...performance and 'doing'. Practice knowledge is situated, context-related and embodied. It relates to what particular people actually do, in a particular place and time" (p. 4).

Practicum affords preservice teachers opportunities, in theory, to (i) operationalize the theoretical and practical knowledge and skills acquired in their ITE courses, and (ii) develop practical wisdom (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2016). Practicum goals and experiences will vary depending on the orientation, requirements, and organizational structure of an ITE program (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2016). Cohen et al. (2013) conducted a literature review across 113 empirical studies focusing on ITE goals in different practicum settings in teacher education

programs. They identified four themes in their analysis. These included (i) promoting preservice teachers' professional abilities (e.g., content and pedagogical knowledge); (ii) getting to know the school environment (e.g., understanding diversity/ies in schools); (iii) supporting the development of preservice teachers' personal growth (e.g., cognitive development); and (iv) understanding ways to have a positive impact in a school (e.g., through using an inquiry approach to mentoring).

Prior to the start of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, virtual practicum was almost unheard of. Research is limited in this area but does explore programs seeking to enhance preservice field experiences through virtual learning. For instance, Johnson et al. (2017) examine ways online discussion forums can support preservice teachers to reflect more deeply during their in-school practicum. As well, some graduate-level teacher education programs offer options for students to complete virtual school field experiences with cooperating teachers in fully online high school settings (e.g., Wilkens et al., 2014); however, such experiences tend not to be popular among students. In Luo at al.'s (2017) study of 141 preservice teachers, only 2.8% of participants expressed initial interest in taking part in a full virtual field experience. Half of participants anticipated insurmountable difficulties in nurturing positive student-teacher relationships in such a setting as well as challenges to creating interactive, student-centered, virtual teaching and learning experiences. The study found that actual exposure to virtual field experiences in K-12 classrooms seemed to spark preservice teachers' interest in online teaching and learning and alleviate some of their prior concerns.

The literature, at the time of planning, was not conducive to supporting the development of a virtual, adapted practicum in the MT Program. This is likely because the traditional in-school practicum, with mentor teachers, has remained a persistent, unwavering rite of passage into the teaching profession. Research detailing pandemic practicum experiences among faculties of education in Canada is slowly emerging (e.g., Burns et al., 2020). This is important scholarship as we have much to learn about the possibilities of (re)visioning practicum programming, particularly strategies to connect teacher candidates to geographically and culturally diverse practicum settings (e.g., remote, rural, suburban, urban).

Background: Circumstances Leading to an Adapted Practicum in the MT Program

The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) requires teacher education programs to allocate 20 percent of teacher training to practicum: a minimum of 80 days (400 hours) of practice teaching. Teacher Candidates (TCs) in the MT Program fulfill this requirement by completing four practicum placements in 4-week blocks, during each of their fall and winter semesters across the two-year program. The MT Program describes these practicum requirements, or practicum, as "an opportunity to integrate academic preparation and educational studies in workplace learning" (Master of Teaching, 2020, p. 5). We pair each TC with an Associate Teacher from a partner school who acts as a mentor of good teaching practice and professionalism, as well as a coach. TCs also have a Faculty Advisor (a university supervisor) who conducts at least one in-class teaching observation and provides feedback on curriculum design and instruction.

Late in the summer of 2020, due to the ongoing global effects of COVID-19, the OCT invited faculty of education Deans across Ontario to apply their judgement on any adjustments to practicum. The minimum 80-day requirement remained in effect but there was recognition that

the in-school practicum format might need to change. Key practicum elements to prioritize were connections to the field, such as to schools, and supervision by a provincially-certified teacher.

By the fall of 2020, the Program's ten partner school boards in the province continued to shift their delivery models for teaching and learning in response to public health concerns and ongoing policy changes. Many boards experienced staffing shortages and there was considerable movement between in-person and virtual student enrollments. Due to the resulting scarcity of available practicum placements in schools (both face-to-face and virtual), the MT Program quickly pivoted to design and implement a four-week adapted practicum program for 400+ first year teacher candidates. In this virtual, modified practicum experience, the Program created pods (groupings) of between 15-30 teacher candidates, each led by 1-2 Practicum Advisors (PAs). PAs were MT Program teacher educators (instructors), like myself, who also possessed provincial certification as teachers, research skills, mentorship capacities, as well as connections with schools and staff.

Methodology: Self-Study of a Virtual Adapted Practicum Model

I draw on self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) as my methodology (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Self-study is increasingly recognized as a principal means for identifying and examining effective practices in teaching (Kitchen et al., 2020) and developing a pedagogy of teacher education (Loughran, 2006). S-STEP and teacher educator learning within the practicum context are lesser-explored areas of research (Petrarca & Van Nuland, 2020; Thomas, 2017; Vanassche & Kelchertmans, 2015).

Self-study is not a specific method for conducting research. Rather, self-study describes the focus of a study (Loughran, et al., 2004). I sought to explore possibilities to support urban-oriented TCs to virtually experience a rural school practicum, through case study, during the pandemic. A self-study approach provided me an opportunity to examine how my rural teacher and researcher *selves* might inform practicum design in one of Canada's largest urban faculties of education. My self-study focused on my experience as a Practicum Advisor responsible for developing and facilitating a modified, virtual practicum program for a cohort of 30 Master of Teaching teacher candidates.

Narrative inquiry is a common method employed in self-studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004); it is a method that is "socially and contextually situated" and rooted in "intentional, reflective activity" (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 21). Drawing on narrative inquiry allowed me to reflect on my personal-professional story as a rural education scholar and explore the meanings I derived from these experiences, and their influence on my practicum program design (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I collected qualitative data through my personal online journals, curriculum planning notes, and retrospective reflections over a period of six weeks (two weeks of pre-planning, and four weeks of the virtual adapted practicum in November 2020). Using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), I coded these texts and highlighted patterns, tensions, and narrative threads. Analysis of my personal reflections was ongoing, both during and after the practicum period. Throughout this process, I had the support of critical friends to validate my findings and/or question what I was seeing/feeling (Loughran, 2007; Schuck & Russell, 2005). Within my individual reflections are key moments and takeaways for creating meaningful virtual rural 'field' experiences for my teacher candidates.

Building an Adapted Practicum: Reflecting on My Rural Teacher and Researcher Selves

The MT Program leadership team encouraged individual Practicum Advisors to draw on our pedagogical strengths, research interests and skills, and professional contacts to develop a unique 4-week adapted practicum curriculum for our pod groups. This autonomy showed trust in our abilities, as teacher educators, to apply our professional judgement and attend to what we deemed the learning priorities of our first-year students. I decided to structure my daily and weekly schedules to mirror an Ontario high school teacher's typical day, including five 75-minute periods. I dedicated one period each day to teacher preparation, or 'prep', and another to lunch. I allocated the remaining three periods to building TCs' rural case study school data portraits, synchronous micro-teaching and team teaching blocks, wellness and self-care activities, professional development sessions (e.g., facilitated by guests from partner school boards), and/or asynchronous work periods (e.g., to create a digital portfolio of the skills acquired during the adapted practicum).

Common among all approaches to self-study is an emphasis on positioning the knowledge and practice of the teacher educator at the center of their academic work (Loughran & Russell, 2002). A self-study approach seems fitting, then, to reflect on how my rural teaching and research background informed how I developed and facilitated an adapted practicum experience for my urban-oriented TCs.

My Rural-Teacher Self

Following my own graduation from OISE with a Bachelor of Education in 2007, I was hired to teach in a rural high school in a small community in southern Ontario. A friend who was a former principal suggested that I "put in my time," gain a few years of experience, and then transfer to a more "vibrant school" in nearby cities before my teaching reputation appeared unappealing to prospective employers and colleagues. She warned, "This [rural] school is a soft landing to begin your career; but don't stay too long" (Pattison-Meek, 2016). The implication was that teaching and learning in a rural setting was undervalued, in comparison to that which takes place in larger, more racially and ethnoculturally diverse, metropolitan settings. I did not take Ms. Principal's advice and have instead acquired a profound appreciation for the pedagogical opportunities and challenges that rural and/or small town school contexts, can present to teachers.

The relative absence of rural settings studied in teacher education literature tends to depict (sub)urban experiences and understandings of teaching and learning as normative, thereby overshadowing the significance of rural settings. Rural tends to be stereotyped as stagnant, contrasted to the stereotype of urban as progressive (*urbane* signifies sophisticated and civilized). "Typically, rural education is viewed from a 'metrocentric' perspective as a deficit educational space that needs to be somehow 'fixed'" (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020, p. 6). Rural tends to be presented relationally as less progressive, lacking cultural diversity, more patriarchal, and more poverty-stricken than urban (Green & Corbett, 2013; Sandberg, 2013). In contrast, rural spaces might also be romanticized as virtuous havens, assumed bereft of the crime and social ills more associated with urban locations (Little, Panelli, & Kraack, 2005). Both of these perspectives essentialize rural, overlooking and/or misrepresenting the diverse lived experiences and social identities found within and among various rural communities. Throughout my ten

years of classroom teaching in my rural high school, my teacher-self sought strategies to confront deficit and stereotypical discourses about rural peoples.

My own urban-oriented teacher training at OISE, grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy, focused on classrooms with racially and ethnically diverse student populations. At no time was I exposed to theory or practice that discussed teaching approaches for working in majority White classrooms (e.g., or rural and/or remote schools more generally). School and community contexts that may seem homogenous along lines of race and/or ethnicity still inevitably possess wide-ranging social and ideological diversities. I assumed that teachers applied culturally responsive pedagogy in these settings, but as a classroom teacher, I could not locate any scholarly studies or professional resources to show how rural-situated teachers adapted or operationalized theory to teach for diversity. I was challenged to develop ways to support my students (and colleagues) to recognize and navigate diverse non-metropolitan cultural practices within my rural high school and community, and across different rural settings. I found that my students might not recognize the diverse lived experiences and/or divergent viewpoints among their peers, beyond race, unless supported pedagogically to draw upon their within-community differences as content for reflection.

My Rural-Researcher Self

In 2016, I completed a PhD to increase scholarly awareness of the complex multiplicity and diversity embedded within rural spaces (Pattison-Meek, 2016). I explored ways three teachers in rural settings dominated by discourses of Whiteness, used subject matter and pedagogies to surface invisible diversities (e.g., social, ethnocultural, ideological) in their ostensibly homogenous schools and rural communities, as well as how they supported students' understandings of racial and ethnocultural differences, deemed to be absent. Conversations with my teacher participants revealed how they experienced a lack of professional support when seeking to expand students' understandings of diversity. In the words of one teacher,

> *I'm often told by colleagues that diversity education doesn't apply in this [rural] school where most students look the same. And by 'same', they mean White. This kind of talk implies that we're a monoculture, which, when you know my students, they clearly are not. We need to understand and value different experiences among rural students, and across different rural communities. But rural isn't sexy when compared to what happens in urban schools.*

I hear a similar sentiment expressed among some TCs in the MT Program. Each year, a handful of rural-aspiring candidates, aware of my rural education background, reach out for support. They express their disappointment with how diversity preparation in non-urban school settings seem deprioritized across their courses. Some TCs even feel intimidated to ask their instructors questions about rural schooling openly, in front of their urban-aspiring colleagues. They fear ostracism for identifying with small town, seemingly White communities, viewed by some as socially anti-progressive.

In the words of Corbett and Gereluk (2020), to live rurally "is to live in relation with a particular physical and human geography and to participate at some level in cultural practices that have their roots in established ways of living and working outside the metropolis" (p. 12). My teacher and researcher *selves* focus on bringing these diverse rural geographies and cultural practices out of the periphery of awareness through teacher education, to support teaching and learning across rural settings. This is not an easy endeavour as an instructor in one of Canada's

largest urban faculties of education. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of TCs in the MT Program express interest in carrying out their fieldwork, and subsequent teaching careers, in racially and ethnoculturally diverse, urban schools in Toronto and/or neighbouring urban regions. An adapted practicum presented me with a narrow opening, in an otherwise urban-dominant curriculum, to expand TCs' gaze beyond the metropolis. In the following section, I outline how I leveraged our virtual platform to support TCs to engage with a case study of one rural high school on the cusp of demographic change.

Sketching Data Portraits of a Rural High School in Transition

Knowing that my TCs were unlikely to experience a rural practicum in the future, I set a goal to use our virtual platform to support TCs to experience rural schools as sites of opportunity. With this goal firmly in place, I chose Case Study High School (CSHS) because of its rural locale and my professional connections with the school's leadership team and teaching staff, as a former Curriculum Leader in the school district. Our case study school would serve as the backdrop for TCs to imagine as their adapted practicum site.

CSHS was located about an hour outside of Toronto. Staff and students characterized the school and local town as tight knit and rural, a social representation alluding to deep and lingering roots in agricultural, working class traditions. CSHS students, staff, and the surrounding community were predominantly White. With urban sprawl entering the nearby countryside, school leaders anticipated an increase in racial and ethnocultural diversity in the school population in coming years. CSHS, facing narrowing distance-to-density and socio-cultural change, in my view, made a compelling practicum case study as a rural school in transition.

As preparation to teach in any new school, teachers often dedicate time to investigate, collect, and consider the complex range of social, economic, and institutional factors shaping the myriad of individual learners' profiles. That is, to start planning teaching with the question: *What can I learn about my school and community so to begin the process of knowing more about my students?* For preservice teachers, one means to practice and apply such skills and understandings is to examine the school and community stories emanating from their practicum sites. CSHS, as our virtual setting, presented an alternative means to support TCs to cultivate a stance and skills to gather a wide array of data as part of developing habits of instructional design.

I asked TCs to assume the role of a new CSHS teacher when planning their upcoming virtual micro-teaching lessons. To support their thinking and planning, I used a series of data inquiries (outlined below) to scaffold TCs' construction of data portraits to give a picture of CSHS. A school data portrait is a mental depiction of a school, inclusive of its students and staff, based on a review of public data, such as school websites. A data portrait illustrates a subject's accumulated data, "meant to convey something about the subject's character or role in society" (Donath et al., 2010). Rather than being objective, portraits are highly subjective representations. Each TC was likely to form a different impression of the school and its learners based on how they processed, or made sense of, the data – similar to drawing or painting a portrait of a shared image. Different biases – explicit and implicit – would shape various aspects of their portraits, and how they understood their learners. In the sections that follow, I explain each step in the process to develop teacher candidates' CSHS data portraits.

Step 1: Conducting a Virtual Neighbourhood Inventory Walk or Roll

Our first approach to building an understanding of CSHS and the surrounding community was to conduct a virtual neighbourhood walk or roll. In non-pandemic times, I would encourage TCs, if possible, to visit their practicum site in person prior to beginning practicum to complete a school and neighbourhood inventory. For our adapted practicum, we opted to use Google Earth instead (a geo-spacial program portraying a 3D-representation of the earth's surface). TCs built their inventories through writing and documenting evidence (e.g., photos, logos) using virtual field notes.

The activity encouraged TCs to observe the school building, school grounds, and the surrounding neighborhood. For instance, the state and age of the building, number of portable classrooms, messages displayed on school signage, and proximity of the school to public transportation, if any. Neighbourhood observations might include local eateries (where might some students go for lunch?), greenspaces (or lack of), language(s) written on public/business signs, location of nearby elementary schools, types of housing, etc. Google Earth's satellite imagery option also allowed TCs to observe the geographic location of CSHS, surrounded by farmland, greenspace, and encroaching sprawl from metropolitan areas.

In having TCs work in pairs to complete this activity, I encouraged them to check their biases, in dialogue with their partner, about the impressions they were forming about the school, its students, and rural community, and what guided those assumptions. For example: *What are your assumptions about students in a rural setting, just outside of Toronto? How might these understandings influence how and what you teach at CSHS?*

Step 2: Accessing School Data Sources Virtually

In my last role before joining the MT Program as a teacher educator, I worked as an Instructional Leader in a school district research department. In this role, I supported administrators, teachers, parents, and community members to access and make sense of available data to understand their schools and guide the development of curriculum and programming. With my knowledge and skills, I guided TCs through a data gathering process, exploring a range of online public resources. For example, the CSHS website was a valuable portal to review available school programs, course offerings, and extra-curricular opportunities. I invited TCs to look for evidence of diversity while applying a broad application of the term – one that affirms different kinds of differences (e.g., socio-economic, gender diversity, language, ideological) amidst perceived homogeneity. We had many spirited conversations in our pod about the ways school and community contexts that may seem uniform along lines of race and/or ethnicity, still inevitably possess broad social and ideological diversity. Such evidence can be gleaned from website photos, (in)access to fee-based programs, school-community partnerships (e.g., with charitable organizations), extra-curricular opportunities (e.g., gender and sexuality alliances), among others.

Other data resources included the school district website (displaying school enrollment projections and boundary maps), school standardized test results and attitudinal data relating to numeracy and literacy (e.g., published online in the provincial Education and Quality and Accountability Office), and public performance reports (e.g., Fraser Institute school rankings). Additionally, some of these sites contain school demographic information, for example, the percentage of English language learners (ELLs) and students with special education needs. In the

case of CSHS, TCs observed near-zero ELL student numbers compared to (sub)urban schools in the same school district. Demographic data for school communities are also available through government census profiles (e.g., Statistics Canada). Examining community shifts in past and present demographics are important, to consider the impact(s) to school culture, socioeconomic makeup, and student needs when planning to teach.

Similar to the previous step, TCs built their inventories as pairs, in continuous dialogue about the impressions they were forming of the school based on how they made sense of the data. Examining a collection of websites and statistics alone can provide a narrow and distorted view of the students attending a school and the community/ies they inhabit. If we hear only a single (data) story about a people or a place, then we risk absorbing and perpetuating harmful misunderstandings (Adichie, 2009). With this in mind, I regularly encouraged TCs to consider the limitations of data, ask whose stories are missing, and how we might access those stories to deepen understandings about our learners.

Step 3: School-Community Asset Mapping

Every community enveloping a school has both assets and needs. Focusing on assets, or strengths, emphasizes what the community does have, rather than its deficits. Identifying and leveraging strengths is one way to improve schools, such as increasing students' sense of belonging, wellness, and achievement. To draw upon a community's assets, we need to discover what they are. For our adapted practicum, we framed a community asset as a local resource: something that improves the quality of life in schools.

As a teacher educator, I encourage new teachers to consider fostering strong relationships between their future schools and local communities. This is important bridge-building work, to promote students' engagement in local conversations and decision-making with other community members, and to build more inclusive, healthy communities. Such assets include services that already, or could potentially, support schools (e.g., libraries, cultural organizations, recreation centers, LGBTQ support services). Local charities (e.g., food sharing services), public transportation, community recycling facilities, and even public spaces, such as nearby parks, bike/walking trails, and recreational fields are all possibilities. People in/from the community are also assets, such as Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, political representatives, business owners, and nursing home residents.

Given the forecasted demographic shifts at CSHS in the coming years, I encouraged TCs to consider community assets that might support increased cultural diversity in the school. This type of thinking required a search for assets located in more ethnoculturally diverse neighbouring towns and cities, including faith organizations, cultural centers, multicultural councils, etc.

Step 4: Data-Driven Dialogues

By this stage in the process, TCs had dedicated considerable time to developing their CSHS data portraits. To follow, I looked to data-driven dialogue as one means to bring TCs' impressions and wonderings together into deeper conversation. Data-driven dialogue is a structured process that invites small groups to make observations, draw inferences, and generate questions about a data set (Wellman & Lipton, 2017). To facilitate the dialogic process, I

provided a conversation menu with a list of prompts for breakout groups of 3-4 students. Questions included:

(i) How would you *describe* your data portrait of CSHS based on your findings thus far?
(ii) What *strengths and assets* are present within (a) the school, and (b) the surrounding rural community? How might teachers leverage these assets to support instructional practice?
(iii) What do you deem to be *priority needs* in this school community? How might teachers attend to these needs through their teaching?
(iv) From your research, how would you describe the priorities and commitments of CSHS and the surrounding rural community?
(v) What student profiles did you begin to imagine based on the available data?
(vi) To what extent do you feel at ease imagining yourself as a teacher in this school? What might be the source of your responses? Do these internal responses belie any sort of latent preferences (e.g., implicit biases) that might influence how you plan to work in this rural school and community?

After the initial breakout session, I rearranged TCs into different group configurations. In these new groupings, participants shared major findings and discussion points (e.g., 'aha' moments) from their previous data dialogues and looked for emergent themes from their sharing. This second round of discussion concluded with TCs generating a list of insights missing from the data, framed as questions to ask during the following day's guest appearances.

Step 5: A Fireside Chat with CSHS Leadership

The final step in constructing TCs' data portraits was a highly anticipated fireside Zoom chat with the principal and vice-principal of CSHS. The TCs appeared keen to speak with school insiders and perhaps be noticed by potential future employers. The administrator team shared with the cohort their eagerness to connect with MT students and engage with their thinking and impressions about CSHS. The TCs moderated the session, posing a series of questions, comprised from our earlier data dialogue sessions.

I noticed two dominant themes emerge from TCs' fireside questions. The first probed the ways CSHS teachers taught in culturally responsive ways given their predominantly White student population, and what supports are available for teachers to do this work (e.g., professional development opportunities). TCs inquired about how the school affirmed different kinds of differences, including socioeconomic status, religious, and ideological diversities. They cited statistics from census data as a basis for their questions (e.g., *According to the demographics of the area, the vast majority of the population is Christian. How might this inform how teachers approach the topic of... ?*). The second theme focused on how the school was attempting to reach all students (living in town and in more rural areas) during the pandemic stay-at-home orders and attend to growing mental health concerns among youth.

Possibilities in Practice to Lift Teacher Candidates' Gaze from the Metropolis

An adapted pandemic practicum allowed me, as a rural educator and researcher teaching in Canada's largest initial teacher education faculty, to create a window of opportunity for my urban-oriented students to experience teaching and learning in one rural school community. Specifically, my reliance on a fully virtual platform enabled me to transport my TCs outside of their metropolis. Prior to the pandemic, such possibilities were not available to TCs in the MT Program who lacked accommodation and/or transportation (and perhaps even the willingness) to travel to a rural setting to experience practicum.

Examining a rural case study school opened a possibility space for urban-oriented TCs to expand their gaze and reflect on preparing to teach in rural settings. The complexity of CSHS posed various considerations for TCs to think through. For instance, how might culturally responsive teaching look, sound, and feel like in a seemingly homogenous White student population? All students, remote, rural, suburban, urban, of all races, bring a complexity of experiences and beliefs to classrooms, which challenge teachers to develop cultural competency and nurture critical consciousness. Bearing this in mind, how might students learn about diversity, and simultaneously experience it in seemingly homogenous settings?

I shared a quote with TCs from a grade 10 student attending a school very similar to CSHS, drawn from my dissertation research (Pattison-Meek, 2016), to provide some insights:

> *There's a lot of internal diversity. Like everyone here has very different opinions and styles and, um, beliefs and that kind of thing. So [diversity] is more than like, it's not really any visible diversity, but it's more like we're all different kinds of people.*

I found this student's reflection to be particularly expressive because she does not seem to limit diversity to something overtly visible (e.g., race, religious clothing) and reflects an appreciation for differences that are internal, such as opinions, beliefs, and social experiences. I wanted TCs to understand that for this student, contexts that may seem similar along lines of race and/or ethnicity, like CSHS, still have the potential to express wide-ranging social and ideological diversity. My goal was to invite TCs to challenge narrow understandings of human difference embodied in some diversity education approaches that tend to overlook less visible social heterogeneities and oppressive stratifications that exist in all communities (e.g., sexual orientation, socio-economic circumstances) – rural and urban. Interestingly, a few TCs recognized how some (sub)urban classrooms might also be viewed as racially and/or ethnoculturally homogenous depending on their demographic. These TCs made links between their personal/professional experiences in (sub)urban settings, and our discussions considering ways to recognize and surface unseen diversities in ostensibly homogenous rural settings.

Another question I posed to TCs asked what it might mean to teach in this particular rural locale, as it gradually transitions toward a more ethnoculturally diverse, suburban setting in the coming years. Many TCs applied contextual information from their portraiture research to design their micro-teaching lesson plans. [1] For instance, one pair of math TCs led their cohort colleagues (role-playing as students) through an analysis of population trends from a town in the same school district as CSHS. This once-rural location recently experienced significant increases in its visible minority and immigrant populations owing to urban migration, comparable to the

[1] As a teacher training technique, micro-teaching in the adapted practicum was a means for teacher candidates to practice their teaching skills in a low-risk, simulated, virtual classroom environment. Peers role-played CSHS high school students during micro-teaching activities.

demographic forecast for CSHS. The math duo invited students to interpret demographic statistics, and then discuss what such changes might mean for CSHS and the local community. In this instance, TCs utilized math learning to initiate a class discussion about community change in a rural context. This was also an opportunity for TCs to practice planning and facilitating a virtual discussion pedagogy infused with potential controversy (contrasting student perspectives) and receive post-lesson feedback from their peers.

Whilst COVID-19 circumstances did not allow first-year TCs to enter school premises or interact with students face-to-face in classrooms, our rural case study school, CSHS, acted as a virtual model for TCs to practice drawing connections between learners, their school, and community context to plan instruction. Prior to the pandemic, there was no formal program requirement for TCs in the MT Program to research their practicum context in advance of entering schools (e.g., embedded within a pre-practicum course). Instead, TCs were encouraged to take the "initiative to seek information about [their] school and community prior to the practicum starting" (Master of Teaching, 2020, p. 24). TCs, however, may lack direction on where to surface such stories to inform their planning and teaching. The virtual adapted practicum, then, was a chance for TCs to practice and apply data gathering skills using CSHS as their rural backdrop. Creating data portraits, through a guided inquiry process, supported TCs to think about how they might gather information to understand how their future students nest in varied schools and communities.

Practicum experiences are eminent for building mentor relationships between TCs and Associate Teachers. Many TCs lamented this opportunity when they learned of the adapted practicum in early fall. However, during the fireside chat with CSHS administrators, I recognized a new piece of my Practicum Advisor role emerging. I saw opportunities to draw on my significant school district and rural school connections to bridge TCs to potential career mentors in rural regions. As a Practicum Advisor, I attempted to model the importance of collaboration and mentorships among teachers, as well as facilitate mentorship opportunities for TCs. I reached out to some of my former school district and rural-situated colleagues to lead virtual professional development sessions as part of my adapted practicum program. These colleagues represent intricate strands of my personal-professional mentor web, woven over fifteen years. Their sessions included: *How to be an anti-racist educator; Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy across diverse school contexts; Programming for empowering your multilingual students; Embedding Indigenous perspectives into your practice,* and *Supporting your newcomer students.* Many of my colleagues invited TCs to connect with them outside of their sessions, as a means to link our educational communities. In this way, we also modelled for TCs the interconnectedness of sustaining professional relationships. Such opportunities to learn from and with rural practitioners might not have been possible without our virtual platform.

Through the self-study process, I came to understand some of my own limitations in shaping alternative approaches to practicum experiences. As I have stated throughout this article, one goal I set when designing the adapted program was to open a space for urban-oriented TCs to experience teaching and learning in rural schools. What I did not consider in my planning was how racial and/or ethnocultural minority TCs might respond to the possibility of teaching in predominantly White, rural school settings. How might their (pre)impressions of CSHS have taken shape in their data portraits? Research exploring the experiences of non-White preservice teachers in predominantly White practicum settings is scarce, and especially so in rural contexts. If I advocate for a teacher education that develops preservice teachers' awareness of themselves,

their students, and the sociocultural contexts of classrooms, across urban and rural geographies, then I need to be more cognizant of how they might anticipate, resist, and/or experience teaching and learning across these various contexts.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this self-study are not generalizable, but illustrative, to invite and inform further questions and reflections about exposing and connecting teacher candidates to school settings they are unlikely to experience during their practicums. Self-study is rooted in intimate scholarship (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2014), where vulnerability and risk are deliberate and daunting features, particularly in the midst of a pandemic. Yet, I share this study to innovate normalized teacher education practices, which remain overwhelmingly urban and suburban in focus, and to inspire TCs and teacher educators to value teaching and learning opportunities in rural school settings.

At first glance, the questions I posed to TCs about our rural case study school presented as challenges (*How might culturally responsive teaching look, sound, and feel like in a seemingly homogenous White student population? What are the opportunities and challenges to teach in this rural locale, as it gradually transitions toward a more ethnoculturally diverse, suburban setting in coming years?*). Yet, I encouraged – and to the best of my ability supported – TCs to embrace each question as an opportunity to work together in dialogue (with fellow TCs, and mentors), to realize a vision of equity and inclusion for CSHS students and staff, for the present and future. I encourage readers to ask: what do I see of my own urban, suburban, rural, remote or other contextual practicum experiences in this study, and what can I take from this examination to apply to my own situation? As this is an exploration of an alternative approach to the practicum, this study will also be of interest to those from professional programs outside of teacher training that include a practical component, such as social work and counseling.

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