

Rural Schools and the Highly Qualified Teacher Provision of *No Child Left Behind*: A Critical Policy Analysis

Karen Eppley
Pennsylvania State University, Altoona

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While there is a growing body of work that considers the implications of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for rural schools, literature that critically examines the policy itself is lacking in rural educational research. This critical policy analysis focuses on the highly qualified teacher provision of NCLB as it relates to rural schools. The goal of critical policy analysis is to contextualize policy within its historical and political landscape, positioning policy as reflective of a group or individual's vision of an ideal society. While the highly qualified teacher provision has been advanced as unproblematic, critical analysis of its broader context suggests a mismatch between its assumptions and the unique needs of rural schools. While undoubtedly all children deserve a highly qualified teacher, what deems a teacher to be highly qualified is a matter that is both complex and highly context-dependent. Thinking about quality teaching in rural schools invites opportunity for dialogue, yet the provision reflects a reductionist, quantifiable conceptualization of quality. The policy stifles debate about what rural communities expect from their teachers, declaring consensus about the role of subject matter knowledge to the exclusion of other factors particularly salient in rural schools.

Recently, I talked with a teacher who began her career in a rural school. She currently teaches in a less rural setting, and when I asked her how her work was different then, she immediately identified the importance of helping children see how they fit within the larger world. She made clear that successful teaching in a rural school is different than successful teaching in other settings. She even suggested that if the rural teacher does not understand this, her students will not learn.

She did not mention anything about standardized testing or the role of teacher certifications as factors important to what makes a teacher highly qualified for rural schools. Rather, in her rural school, successful teaching required that she worked as a mediator between the curriculum and the lived experiences of the children in her classroom. Her students were deeply rooted in the immediate community, having extensive generational ties and few opportunities to travel beyond the nearest town. Because of this, it was essential that she both understand the children's relationship

with their place and, simultaneously, use her adult point of view to help them understand their relationship with their larger world. She was certain that if both of these conditions weren't met, learning would not occur.

The quality teaching this teacher describes falls outside of the parameters outlined in the highly qualified teacher provision of the 2001 federal *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*. Further, she suggests that reducing quality teaching to characteristics that can be standardized and quantified would be counterproductive for rural schools. This critical policy analysis of the highly qualified teacher provision of *NCLB* will extend this argument. Analyzing the highly qualified teacher provision with critical policy analysis enables contextualization of the policy within its historical and political landscape, positioning policy as reflective of a group or individual's vision of an ideal society.

Critical Policy Analysis: An Introduction

Critical policy analysis is an examination of policy in which policy is positioned as the outcome of historical and social contexts and power relations (Edmondson, 2004; Taylor, 1997). Such analysis looks closely at a policy's origins and consequences with an eye toward justice and equity. Thus, it is overtly political work; it *should* originate

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All correspondence should be directed to the author at keh118@psu.edu.

from a moral and ethical stance (Prunty, 1985). It should never be neutral or objective because the work itself is a rejection of the neutrality of schooling (Prunty, 1985). Critical policy analysis stands in contrast to functionalist policy study wherein the primary goal is to assess goodness of fit between the policy and current circumstances (Edmondson, 2004). In other words, this analysis will not (explicitly) consider whether the highly qualified teacher provision “works” in the sense that declaring teachers to be highly qualified leads to higher test scores; instead, it will consider the underlying values of the provision and its consequences in rural communities. Toward this end, these questions will guide this analysis:

- 1) Where did this policy originate and what were the values that directed the historical trajectory of this policy?
- 2) What are the consequences of this policy for rural schools and teachers?

Each of these questions will be considered in turn after an overview of the highly qualified teacher policy. This article concludes with an invitation to rural schools and rural education scholars to engage in discussion about what constitutes a highly qualified teacher in a rural school.

Overview of the Highly Qualified Teacher Policy

Under *NCLB* a teacher is highly qualified in a core academic area if she holds a bachelor’s degree, a teaching license, and demonstrates knowledge in every subject area in which she teaches (see Table 1). The original intent of the legislation was to have every teacher deemed highly qualified by 2006. Compliance has been uneven, with nearly a third of states showing a decline in percent of classrooms in compliance since the 2003-2004 school year (*A Summary of Highly Qualified Teacher Data*, 2008). The delineation

of teacher quality has been advanced within language about how *all* children, regardless of where they live or their level of income, *deserve* a highly qualified teacher, and schools that do not staff classrooms with *highly qualified* teachers will be held *accountable*.

The language of the provision is used as a tool to present its objectives in such a way that no rational person could disagree. Quality teaching is simplified and quantified in a way that makes it politically possible to solve a problem that may or may not exist. On the surface, the provision seems inherently “good”; its language is innocuous and appears to advance commonly-held goals and values. Indeed, educational research affirms that teacher quality makes a tremendous impact on student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 1999). When out-of-school factors such as family income are controlled, teachers are the biggest predictor of a student’s success in school (Carey, 2004). Yet, according to a study by the Center on Education Policy (McMurrer, 2007), the highly qualified teacher provision was regarded by three-quarters of district administrators and over a third of state officials as ineffective: having *minimal or no impact* on student achievement or its efforts to improve teacher quality.

While conversations about highly qualified teaching are needed in every context, the “neutrality” of the provision’s assumptions are especially problematic in rural schools. The unique challenges facing rural schools – including staffing and retention, funding, curriculum, and enrollment – make a legislated, uniform determination of what constitutes a highly qualified teacher more complicated than the language of the provision suggests. While the logistical challenges of rural schools make the provision problematic for rural schools, there are greater issues resulting from an external, homogenous determination of teacher quality. Expectations of rural communities for education are unique (Aerni, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Edmondson, 2003) because the needs of rural communities largely reflect circumstances unique to those communities. Therefore, the expectations rural community

Table 1

Definitional Criteria for Highly Qualified Teachers

Highly Qualified Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content area bachelor’s degree in the subject(s) taught <i>and</i> • Full state certification or licensure <i>and</i> • Proof of content knowledge for each subject taught
Subject Matter Competency Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major (or equivalent credits) in the subject taught • Pass a state-developed test • Retro-qualify via HOUSSE • Advanced certification from the state • Graduate degree

Note: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education (2004).

members have for their schools often reflect these unique circumstances. Under the provision, rural schools and communities lose their opportunity to define teacher quality in ways that meet local needs.

While rural communities themselves may defy generalizations, the expectation under *NCLB* for teacher quality and student achievement is that *all* rural communities will offer standardized factory model schooling where accountability is a “system of controls” (McNeil, 2005, p. 59). The value of the “product” (the students) is determined by an external standard of proficiency in the same way that a teacher’s value to her students is determined externally and without regard to the context in which she teaches. This model of quality teaching must, by its nature, be reproduced in every school in the nation, regardless of context. The criteria for high-quality teaching must be generic and standardized in order to produce data that enable comparison and ranking of every school in every context (McNeil, 2005). With only one state currently in compliance, this project has proven to be difficult.

In 2004, two years in advance of the deadline for every teacher to become highly qualified under the law, the U.S. Department of Education under Margaret Spellings offered schools two means of delaying compliance. Like the provision as a whole, neither program is neutral. The first, the Rural Flexibility Provision, is specifically targeted to rural schools that fall within narrow parameters. The other, High Objective Uniform State Standards (HOUSSE), offers broader, but temporary, assistance.

The Rural Flexibility Provision

This controversial flexibility provision was offered only to the rural schools that qualified for the U.S. Department of Education’s Small Rural Schools Achievement program (Rural School and Community Trust, 2004). It gave rural veteran teachers in sparsely-populated districts with fewer than 600 students one extra year to attain highly qualified status. As a U.S. Department of Education (2004) fact sheet reads:

Approximately one-third—or almost 5,000—of all school districts in the United States are considered rural. As Department officials have traveled the country listening to teachers and state and district officials, they frequently have heard that the highly qualified teacher provisions of the *NCLB* law don’t adequately accommodate the special challenges faced by teachers in small, rural districts. Often, the teachers in these areas are required to teach more than one academic subject. This new flexibility is designed to recognize this challenge and provide additional time for these

teachers to prove that they are highly qualified (p. 1).

Left unstated is that only school districts that qualified for the Small Rural Schools Achievement Program will benefit from the allowance. As the Rural School and Community Trust notes, “to qualify for the SRSA, a school district must either have fewer than 600 students in Average Daily Attendance or be located in a county with fewer than 10 people per square mile. Also, all schools in the district must be located in communities with fewer than 2,500 residents” (2004, p. 2). According to the Trust, the so-called flexibility rules effectively exclude about 75% of the nation’s rural and small-town schools and show racial, regional, and poverty bias, excluding some of the highest need rural schools in the county. The bulk of the Small Rural School Achievement Program’s qualifying schools are located in the Midwest and Great Plains regions. For example, in 2008 two school districts in Georgia received Small Rural School Achievement program awards totaling \$39,466. In the same year, 343 Oklahoma districts received \$7,125,150 in funding.¹

While the Small Rural School Achievement teachers were granted an extra year for compliance, the schools of the Rural Low Income Schools program, many of which are located in large, centralized districts of the Southeast (Rural School and Community Trust, 2004), were granted no such extensions. According to the Trust, the student populations of these schools are different. “Students in flexibility-denied Rural Low Income Schools are eight times more likely to be African American than students in flexibility-eligible Small Rural School Achievement Schools” (Rural School and Community Trust, 2004, p. 3). The schools eligible for the Rural Low Income Schools grants include many of the poorest and hardest to staff rural schools, yet they were granted no assistance in meeting the requirements of the provision. Instead of supporting the oft stated goal of ensuring that all rural children are taught by a highly qualified teacher, the Trust notes:

The decision to fashion the flexibility relief in this way underscores the dilemma of the highly qualified teacher provisions of *NCLB*. While positioning the federal government as the champion of high quality teaching, the act does nothing to remedy the fact that the poorest schools in the most challenging settings face the most difficulty competing in the marketplace for good teachers; and that teacher preparation and professional development programs do not focus

¹ The Small Rural School Achievement grant awards for the 2008-2009 school year can be found at www.ed.gov/programs/reapsrsa/grant08/index.html.

well on rural school needs or are often inaccessible to rural teachers...Instead of providing a remedy to these problems, the new federal flexibility rules were crafted to provide relief mainly to states with less rural poverty, fewer rural minorities, and generally higher test scores. (2004, p. 3)

The recent U.S. Department of Education (2008) report *A Summary of Highly Qualified Teacher Data* states that nationally a student in a low poverty school is 5% less likely to have a teacher deemed highly qualified than a student in a high poverty school. Sheila Talamo, a Louisiana state administrator explains why these numbers should be interpreted cautiously at best. In an interview with *Education Week* (Honawar, 2008), she notes that in Louisiana, number four on the Rural School and Community Trust's "Rural Priority" list from 2005, the pervasiveness of poverty is such that the poverty rates of some "low-poverty" schools exceed those of high-poverty schools in other states. Talamo also remarks that this is possible because individual states, not the federal government, determine what percentage of student participation in free and reduced lunch program deems a school high or low poverty (personal communication, October 10, 2008). Thus, in a state such as Louisiana, the pervasiveness of poverty is such that enough schools have 100% participation in the federal lunch program to make a rate of 40%, for example, seem relatively "low" by comparison. Whereas in a relatively low-poverty state such as New Hampshire, a school in which 40% of children participate in the federal lunch program might be considered a high-poverty school.

Further, state-by-state, significant gaps exist. In Maryland, for example, 66% of students attending high-poverty schools are taught by highly qualified teachers, while 95% of students attending low-poverty schools are taught by highly qualified teachers. The report found that on average, across all schools, grade levels, and locations, 94% percent of core academic classes were staffed by a highly qualified teacher during the 2006-2007 school year.

Even though 94% of all classrooms are in compliance, no data exist linking the highly qualified-teacher provision even to increased test scores. This report underlines the difficulty of evaluating the rate of compliance with the provision in ways that might be useful in working toward equity, but it also continues to ignore the small, but significant numbers of schools for whom the provision is neither appropriate nor workable. The full document (Spellings, 2006) does not report the rate of highly qualified teachers in rural schools, but four of the states with the highest percentage of teachers teaching on waivers in high-poverty schools are rural states: West Virginia (7%), Louisiana (8%), Mississippi (9%), and Idaho (9%). Thus, the flexibility rules would seem to ignore the realities of our most challenged rural schools. More

statistical research is needed on the incidence and impact of out of field teaching in rural schools.

High Objective Uniform State Standard (HOUSSE)

Comparisons across classifications such as high-poverty/low-poverty, rural/urban are problematic; state-to-state comparisons are suspect as well. In 2004, in response to the overwhelming failure of schools in every state to satisfy the highly qualified teacher requirements, the High Objective Uniform State Standard provision was offered. In order to defer the legislation's penalty phase, HOUSSE offers the option of submitting plans that propose alternative means for practicing teachers to establish their highly qualified status. State HOUSSE plans might include consideration of student test scores, years of service, professional development, and combined subject area exams. In many states, this means accumulating points from a menu of options including college coursework, certifications, years of service, and professional development. The Education Commission of the States offers an online database² that facilitates state to state comparisons of HOUSSE plans. The deadline for teachers to establish their highly qualified status was the end of the 2006-2007 school year, but states can continue to use HOUSSE as the penalty phase is again deferred during the anticipated *NCLB* reauthorization. Secretary Spellings has reiterated her wish that phasing out of HOUSSE will be a priority in *NCLB* reauthorization.

The Origins of NCLB's Highly Qualified Teacher Provisions

Understanding the broader legislative context of the highly qualified teacher provision of *NCLB* is necessary if the policy analysis is to resist the positioning of policy as arbitrary or inevitable (Lewis & Miller, 2003). *NCLB* is a reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* of 1965. A regular succession of federal education legislation and reports followed *ESEA*, shaping the federal definition of highly qualified teachers in particular ways. These include President Reagan's 1981 reauthorization of *ESEA* as the *Education Consolidation Improvement Act, A Nation at Risk* of 1983, *Goals 2000* of 1994, the *Reading Excellence Act* of 1998, and the *Education Sciences Reform Act* and the *NCLB* Act of 2001. These acts reflect the various values and hopes of their times (Edmondson, 2004), but all are driven by an emphasis on standardization and positivist science as the means to economic prosperity, ideals voiced in the highly qualified teacher provision of *NCLB*. Each piece of legislation reviewed below contributed to the highly qualified teacher provision as it stands today.

² See mb2.ecs.org/reports/Report.aspx?id=1048

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965

In 1965, rural America was struggling with dramatic declines in population and an aging demographic (Wood, 2008). Changes in the structure of agribusiness resulted in sharp declines in the number of family farms. This had strongly negative effects on small businesses and rural communities, further contributing to rural depopulation, from which some areas still have not recovered (Wood, 2008). Rural school consolidations were also spurred by decreasing population and economic downturn in a climate of post-Sputnik rhetoric (Bard, Gardner, & Wieland, 2006) and civil rights. The time was right for a scientific solution to abate inequity and poverty, but Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* of 1965 was the outcome of a multi-decade long trend toward quantification and faith in positivist science (Lagemann, 2000). The original legislation broke ground for the use of high stakes testing as a means of governmental supervision. Early in the history of *ESEA*, Senator Robert F. Kennedy insisted that Title I program evaluation be tied to funding in an effort to ensure that federal monies reached the poor children for whom they were intended. The program evaluation was to take the form of standardized reading tests, the results of which were to be made public (Shannon, 2007). Public reporting, it was argued for the first time, would stimulate comparisons between schools, districts, and states, enabling competition and making schools accountable to parents (Shannon, 2007).

The standardized test was thus established as an extension of the federal government. Through standardized testing, the set of criteria schools had to meet in order to receive federal support was quantified. Those making decisions about the utilization of monies received were far removed from the schools where the money was needed and the potential of these actions to facilitate student achievement was presented as self-evident. The passage of *ESEA* initiated the teacher's relationship with standardized tests. For the first time, specific representations of student learning were measured and reported. Unfavorable results would cause schools to lose portions of federal funding, money often used to pay reading teachers' salaries.

The 1965 *ESEA* emphasized standardized testing as a means to address poverty. By 1983, teacher quality was seen as an important factor in student achievement. *A Nation at Risk* looked at this relationship in a new way.

A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform of 1983

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education authored *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report came at a time when rural

America, and by extension the whole country, truly was at risk. The farm crisis of the 1980s was a time of falling land and crop values, rising interest rates, and foreclosures. Farming families were in crisis. Marked increases in the rates of alcohol abuse, divorce, child abuse, gun violence, and suicides occurred disproportionately in rural communities (Ramirez-Ferrero, 2005). The report concluded that schools were so inadequate that the economic prosperity of the country was in peril because American workers could not compete in the global economy (Shannon, 2007). The report charged that future teacher candidates were among the less able students in high schools and colleges, and characterized time spent in methods courses as detracting from time available for "subject matter courses" (p. 20). The "Findings Regarding Teaching" section of *A Nation at Risk* concludes by noting that half of new math, science, and English teachers were "not qualified" to teach these subjects (p. 20).

The statistics on which the report's conclusions were based have been widely criticized. Berliner and Biddle (1995), for example, offer detailed analysis that contradicts the notion that U.S. public schools are in crisis. Bracey (2003, 2006) also debunks the myth of the crisis and questions the relationship between economic prosperity and the condition of our public schools. These critics and others disputed the core finding of *A Nation at Risk*, that a "rising tide of mediocrity" was overtaking U.S. schools and the inadequacies should be regarded as an "unfriendly foreign power." Teaching and teachers shared blame for perceived deficiencies in "educational performance," along with inadequate curriculum, lowered expectations, and misuse of time (p. 17).

The document's claims about teaching and teachers are but one reiteration of the foundation on which the highly qualified teacher provision rests. The document would have readers believe that the intellect of teachers is suspect and their lack of content area knowledge is one of four major factors responsible for a described decline in the performance of students. While the report was a continuation of themes identifiable in *ESEA* and the *Higher Education Act*, *A Nation at Risk* more clearly links deficits in teaching and the intellect of teachers themselves to the educational crisis described in the document. These themes resonate within *NCLB* as a whole and are points of emphasis in the highly qualified teacher provision. Though *A Nation at Risk* was a report, its principles were legislated as the *Goals 2000 Educate America Act* in 1994 and as the *NCLB Act* in 2001.

Goals 2000 Educate America Act of 1994

Linking standards to higher achievement of *all* students in *every* school, *Goals 2000* (P.L. 103-227) of 1994 laid the

groundwork for ESEA in its current form as NCLB. *Goals 2000* laid the foundation for the current era of standards-based reform and “accountability,” in which student achievement on standardized tests is directly linked to federal funding. The legislation was born during the height of neoliberalism, the belief that free market economic competition is the optimal solution to social problems (Giroux, 2005). Within neoliberal thought, schools are most effectively managed by the application of economic principles such as efficiency and competition. As might be expected, great disparities existed in school funding in the 1990s. The poorest rural communities were excluded from the economic prosperity of the 1990s and as free-market policies were legislated, social safety nets were dismantled (Edmondson, 2003). In 1996, rural America faced two separate policies that challenged already-struggling rural communities. President Clinton’s *Freedom to Farm Act* reorganized government subsidies to heavily favor agribusiness at the expense of small family farms, and his welfare reform moved people off welfare rolls and into jobs that paid less than a living wage (Edmondson, 2003). It was within this context that notions of standards-based reform were born, a market-based solution for struggling schools. Within a market-based model, rural schools are isolated entities that either are or are not meeting standards, instead of reflections of their broader social context.

By 1994 the most salient defining characteristic of the effective teacher, master of content area knowledge, was

well established. *Goals 2000*, initiated by President George H. W. Bush in 1991, but signed into law by President Clinton in 1994, called for “continued improvement of (teachers’) professional skills,” specifically citing a need for teachers to obtain “additional knowledge and skills needed to teach challenging subject matter” enabling them to teach increasingly diverse students and prepare “all” students for the next century.

Clinton’s (Failed) 1998 ESEA Reauthorization

President Clinton attempted to advance the spirit of *Goals 2000* in his plan for ESEA reauthorization. His proposal included a strong emphasis on standards-based testing as the primary means by which schools would be held accountable for serving disadvantaged students. Being “held accountable” meant the loss of federal funds. Specific plans for improving teacher quality were proposed as well. Clinton called for performance testing of new teachers and sought to end out-of-field and emergency certified teaching within four years.

Even though Clinton’s plan failed in a Republican-majority Congress, all of the major themes would eventually resurface as NCLB. With successful passage of *Goals 2000*, the stage for the highly qualified teacher provision was set at least seven years prior to NCLB, its precedents clearly traceable over several decades of legislatively-based school reform (see Table 2). Effective teaching was defined and

Table 2
Legislative Origins of NCLB’s Highly Qualified Teacher Provisions

Legislation	Statements about Teachers	Core Message	Implications for Rural Teachers
ESEA (1965)	Student progress can best be determined by standardized tests.	(Positivist) scientific knowledge production is the most effective means of overcoming social inequality and improving educational quality.	“Rural” is ignored in standardized assessments.
Nation at Risk (1983)	Inadequate teacher quality and qualifications are responsible for the “rising tide of mediocrity” in U.S. schools.	Strong accountability and market-based solutions are required to improve educational quality and, by extension, national security and economic competitiveness.	High quality teaching is defined as content matter knowledge, and is context-independent.
Goals 2000 (1994)	Teachers need increased subject matter credentials in order to prepare diverse students to contribute to the global economy.	Successful schools are accountable, efficient, and competitive.	The role of the teacher is to prepare students to compete economically. High quality teaching is context-independent.

standardized across context as content area expertise. The high-stakes test was established as a tool of the Department of Education and the exclusive measure of academic success. The last task remaining was the union of content area expertise and the high stakes test to produce the highly qualified teacher provision in *NCLB*.

Consequences of the Highly Qualified Teacher Provision

While undoubtedly all children deserve highly qualified teachers, what makes a teacher “highly qualified” is a matter awash in a complexity. Thinking about quality teachers invites opportunity for dialogue within and across groups involved in public education, yet the provision reflects a reductionist, quantifiable conceptualization of quality presented as self-evident. The policy is positioned as self-evident, seeming to stifle debate about what communities expect from their teachers, declaring consensus about the role of subject matter knowledge to the exclusion of other factors particularly salient in rural schools. Yet, in what follows, I hope to disrupt this position and begin much-needed dialogue about what constitutes a highly qualified teacher in a rural community.

Daisy Slan, a rural school administrator in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana explained the disconnect between the oft-stated goal of the provision to ensure *all* children are taught by a highly qualified teacher and the realities of rural and other hard-to-staff schools:

I think the law did more harm than good. On the surface, you could understand why the provision may have been in the law, ... but [when you are replacing teachers, largely from the community,] who had the wherewithal to do a good job for our students with teachers who are certified but who can't or won't or don't have the energy to teach the population of children we have, they weren't necessarily helping us. (“NCLB rules on ‘quality’ fall short,” 2007, p. 1)

This administrator also notes that when Louisiana stopped issuing license waivers, reducing the pool of applicants, she lost valuable flexibility in making hiring decisions. She reports disqualifying able and experienced, but not certified, teachers who ultimately could find better paying and less challenging work in other districts. This is not to suggest that the primary limitation of this provision in rural settings is that it complicates staffing logistics. While this may be true, the larger issue is that under the provision, this administrator cannot make staffing decisions based on her knowledge of her school and its community. School administrators are forced to put aside what they know about

the qualities of strong rural teachers. When schools are hard to staff, candidates’ content credentials become the primary means of determining who will or will not be hired.

Simplified explanations of out of field teaching such as too few teachers being trained and misplacement of current teachers (Ingersoll, 2004), do not reflect the realities of rural schools. Definitions and criteria for teaching credentials are based on norms that do not necessarily take notions of “rural” into account. It is well established in rural educational research that inequities in per pupil spending leave rural districts unable to offer competitive salaries (e.g., Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003) to entice young teachers to live and teach in remote settings. For the 100 schools in Alaska that employ three or fewer teachers (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003) and other uniquely hard-to-staff locations, out of field teaching is more complex than, “a cheap and convenient way of closing the gap between demands and resources...of making ends meet” (Ingersoll, 2004, p. 49).

Predictably, the numbers of multiple-subject teachers is highest in smaller schools (Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003). Rural teachers have done interdisciplinary work for centuries. The provision rests upon the idea that individual teachers should teach small, distinct units of knowledge and it is up to the learner to make sense of the coherent whole. Yet it seems that if rural teachers are to help children develop a larger sense of the world, then well-defined distinctions between subject areas does not support this project. Michael Corbett (2007) observes that a standardized curriculum reflects what “someone, somewhere” deems important (p. 273). So, too, does the provision. It is a poor fit for rural schools because it preempts local staffing decisions, but also because quality teaching should not be defined in a “one best” way that ignores both place and students.

Those who feel the effects of this phenomenon most acutely, such as the lone teacher and the student body of eleven that are the K-12 Chignik Bay School in Alaska, live lives the most removed from those holding power over the fate of their school. This remote fishing village balances dangerously on the edge of losing their school as enrollment declines, and adding a highly qualified teacher requirement seems like a cruel joke on staff members that travel by bush plane to serve multiple schools in the district. While this school is an extreme example, it is required to comply regardless of its unusual circumstances. The current version of the policy does not account for schools like Chignik Bay. What staff would replace these teachers? Assuming for a moment that new teaching staff who are highly qualified to teach in *every* subject to students in grades kindergarten through twelve could be lured to the bush from the lower 48 states, what would it mean for the children of Chignik Bay school to replace their teacher with an outsider?

Should One Size Fit All?

With roughly thirty percent of all public schools considered rural, enrolling nineteen percent of all public school children across the United States (Strange & Johnson, 2005), there is marked diversity across rural schools, yet similarities set them apart from less rural settings. Some rural education research paints pictures of rural schools as naturally small (Swidler, 2004) places where parental involvement is high, where the school buildings host evening and weekend community functions, where every child is known by name by staff members who are lifelong residents of the communities in which they teach (Lewis, 2003). Theobald and Natchigal (1995) and Theobald and Curtiss (2000) write about the importance of the relationship between the rural school and its community.

Other rural educational research challenges idyllic notions of rural schools. Issues such as funding inequities, low teacher salaries, limited curriculum and facilities, persistent consolidations, generational poverty, and low-income student transiency are some of the challenges that plague rural schools (Bauch, 2001; Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003). While it is problematic to categorically assign general characteristics like these to rural schools as a group, the highly qualified teacher provision is based on the notion that schools, teachers, and children are both quantifiable and generalizable. To consider rural schools and teachers as categories of analysis necessitates speaking in generalizations to some extent. At the same time, generalization as a matter of course distorts the multiple realities of rural schools. Schools considered rural can be located in profoundly dissimilar settings with profoundly dissimilar populations, from exclusive ski hamlets in Colorado (Lewis, 2003), to rural parishes in Louisiana, to remote Yup'ik villages in Alaska. The challenges that face disparate schools all falling under the category "rural" cannot be mitigated by legislation that seeks, at best, to normalize them, any more than the same legislation can normalize individual students and teachers.

"Rurality" as a social and cultural construct (as opposed to a bureaucratically-delineated category) implies a deep connection to place; the rural place is much more than simply a backdrop to one's life. This is the distinction between residency and inhabitance that Orr (1992) describes. The highly qualified rural teacher understands this. Rural residents may define their identity, in part, through connection to a rural place (Bushnell, 1999), and census bureau designation as rural or not matters little in how they see themselves.

What it might mean to be a highly qualified teacher in a rural school is worthy of careful consideration at least because rural schools present specific challenges both to the overarching vision informing *NCLB* and the specific

implementation of the highly qualified teacher provision. What it means to be a highly qualified rural teacher is as variable as the communities in which the teachers work, and different still from more urban settings. Affirmations of the differences between urban and rural settings constitute a substantive area of scholarship in rural education.

Bauch (2001), for example, writes about the unique set of community identifiers or common features that make rural schools dramatically different from their metropolitan counterparts, citing economic, educational, and social characteristics. The rural teacher has students who are more likely to be poor and their parents have less education than urban parents. Bauch describes students who strongly identify with their rural place and may reject out of hand the notion of leaving it to seek higher education or follow a career path that will take them away from home. How does this correspond with the notion of a student's eventual contribution to the global economy as indication of school success? How might a rural teacher teach students differently who have little desire to "get ahead" of their rural families and peers? How does this child fit within the vision of *NCLB* and what makes her highly qualified? What might rural teachers need to know about students who value their sense of place and their connections with the people who live there more than their ability to compete on the global job market? What might they need to understand about the rural literacies that her students bring to the classroom?

Highly Qualified Teaching: Student Achievement

Theobald and Howley critique the discourse of globalization as "a rhetorical device to enlist even rural backwaters in the national effort to safeguard the global economic dominion of the U.S. political economy" (1998, p. 151). Given that much of the highly qualified rhetoric has been around the urgency for poor and disadvantaged children to have highly qualified teachers so that they may "achieve," one must ask what is meant by achievement under *NCLB*. Achievement could mean developing the skills necessary to think deeply about one's community, engage in its development, and make purposeful decisions about one's own life, goals that a highly qualified rural teacher would help her students meet. Instead, achievement under *NCLB* describes the ability of students to reach arbitrary cut off scores of proficiency on standardized tests under the tutelage of a highly qualified teacher. Failure to do so brings about a variety of market-driven consequences for children and communities.

If the ethical questions around how rural teachers might prepare children for life after schooling are complex, performing these tasks is even more so (Corbett, 2007). In some contexts, the characteristics of the rural highly qualified teacher are obvious. Take for example, the Yup'ik

immersion program in the Lower Kuskokwim School District described in *Saving Our Schools* (Areni, 2004). The rural highly qualified teacher in this rural school speaks fluent Yup'ik. Who would replace her and how will her school and community endure in spite of *NCLB*? A position paper on *NCLB* by the National Rural Education Association (2004) reads in part, "If we can put a man on the moon and send a bomb down a smoke stack from 10,000 feet, you would think a multi-variant system of looking at a school system could be developed. The reliance on absolute measures is a product of small minds" (p.16). In fact, a variant system could be developed if policy makers valued the outcome that such a system would support.

Highly Qualified Teaching: Place

All rural teachers, say Theobald and Howley (1998), have a special obligation to ground curriculum and instruction in the immediate locality. They have a special obligation to awaken students to the concept of sustainability and to help them develop and nurture a sense of place. This is an urgent requirement of the rural highly qualified teacher and has little to do with test scores and certifications, and everything to do with nurturing students and sustaining communities. Knowledge of place holds the promise of contributing to the development of meaningful identity, an identity far more substantive than the identity derived from one's ability to accumulate material goods (Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). These possibilities are examples of alternate ways to conceptualize the work of a rural highly qualified teacher. These characteristics, however, have no potential to be valued under the law in part because the conflation of two distinct premises (all children deserve a highly qualified teacher and the premise of the highly qualified teacher as a product of subject matter assessments) shuts down debate about quality teaching. This "bait and switch" preempted dialog between policy makers, rural teachers, administrators, and community members, dialog that may have resulted in a highly qualified teacher policy reflective of the unique needs and characteristics of rural schools and communities. Such policy would have the potential to make space within the talk about what *all* children deserve for what our *rural* children deserve.

Conclusion

The only response from policy makers to rural schools regarding highly qualified teacher mandates thus far has been the so-called flexibility provision, a misdirected and inadequate attempt to mitigate the law's effects in rural schools. Instead, rural educators need to provide clear explanations to policymakers about what constitutes a highly qualified rural teacher, and provisions to laws need to

account for the distinct differences needed for high quality instruction in diverse rural communities. As the country prepares for new presidential leadership, there has never been a better time for rural educational researchers, schools, and communities to begin the important and difficult work of articulating what makes a teacher highly qualified to teach in our rural schools. Advocate is yet another role the highly qualified rural teacher must assume.

Most teachers begin their careers very close to their growing-up place (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). While this is true of rural teacher candidates, the same study finds that prospective rural teachers are more likely as compared to urban and suburban teachers to *out-migrate* to a suburban or urban setting. Regardless of how highly qualified teaching is federally mandated, if we are to employ teachers in rural schools that are positioned to do the work that Theobald and Howley (1998) recommend, outmigration of our local teachers must be addressed through collaborations between "local" universities and rural districts. For all beginning rural teachers, Collins (1999) found that local community involvement reduces turnover, suggesting that rural districts might take a more active role in fostering school-community partnerships that engage both children and teachers.

As I hoped to demonstrate within this policy analysis, contrary to what the highly qualified teacher provision suggests, a homogenous definition of teacher quality is neither advisable nor possible and the provision must be resisted. Rural and small schools that are unable to meet the demands of *NCLB* may have no choice but to consolidate (Reeves, 2003; Jimerson, 2004). Aside from some important items of consideration such as those recommended by Theobald and Howley (1998) and the statistical research on teacher recruitment and retention, no definition of teacher quality will be offered here. It is the role of the critical theorist to help "catalyze" a course of action, but it is not to specify a course of action (Prunty, 1985, p. 137). Rural educational researchers, schools, and communities must come to the table around this issue, both locally and nationally. Groups such as the National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition, the National Rural Education Association, and the Rural School and Community Trust are starting points at which one may begin to connect with others concerned with the impact of the highly qualified teacher provision on rural schools.

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