

One Teaching Residency Program Examines Features that Promote “Going Rural”

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Preliminary data from the Rural Teacher Residency program assessment research in northern California has provided some insight into graduates’ preparation for, and inclination to pursue, teaching in a rural school. Focus groups, surveys, and field-based interviews were analyzed for themes related to program features that most contributed to graduates’ sense of preparation for, and interest for teaching in, rural schools. Findings indicate that a strong collaborative community of educators, both among the preservice teachers and in the partner schools, creates conditions that support both the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural schools.

Much has been written about teacher shortages impacting the United States now and in the near future, and these shortages may be most especially felt in the rural areas of the country (Fong, Makkonen, & Jaquet, 2016). Many teacher preparation programs have concentrated on ways to address these impending teacher shortages, and some of these programs have focused on the importance of preparing teachers specifically to “go rural” (e.g. Trinidad et al. 2014, Azano & Stewart, 2014). The Rural Teacher Residency (RTR) program at California State University, Chico (<http://www.csuchico.edu/soe/advanced/education/rtr/index.shtml>), in the far northern and relatively sparsely populated part of the state, sought to deliver teacher preparation with features, based in the research (e.g. Hammer et al., 2005), for more successfully recruiting and retaining teachers in harder to staff contexts. The program was a one-year residency where candidates co-taught with a mentor teacher in one of four high-need rural partner school districts. After completing the credential requirements, Masters level coursework, and classroom action research (see Schulte & Halpern-Klipfel, 2015), graduates earned a Masters degree in Education and a credential in either multiple subjects or special education. CSU, Chico’s residency program, funded by a federal government Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant, is one of only a few designed specifically for a rural context. Because of this funding, program participants were provided a loan, for living expenses during the highly intensive RTR year, which was forgiven if they worked in a high need district for three years upon completion of the program.

Teacher shortage research by Fong, Makkonen, and Jaquet (2016) found that the percentage of teachers expected to retire between 2014 and 2024 in the 12 counties served by CSU, Chico ranged from 19% (Sutter) to 49% (Colusa) averaging 32% across all counties (p. A-2-A-3) and showing variation based on subject area. Because the research (e.g. Reininger, 2012) suggests that teacher education graduates often choose to live near their hometown, the RTR

program worked to recruit program participants from CSU, Chico's primarily rural region. In addition, there was some hope that RTR graduates who were not predisposed to teaching in rural contexts might choose to, as a result of their experience in the residency program.

Participants, Data Sources, and Analysis

The RTR program was funded for five years and had a total of 87 completers. Two years after the program ended, program faculty collected both quantitative and qualitative data on the impacts of the features of the RTR program on graduates' preparation. (Additional articles will report on, for example, the impact of co-teaching with a mentor and the impact of having conducted action research as a preservice teacher.) Program assessment data of the RTR program have provided some insight into how graduates were impacted in terms of their preparation for and their inclination to want to work in rural communities.

This article will outline some preliminary findings of two focus groups (26 participants total), which were used to develop a survey sent to all graduates, which had 70 respondents. Themes were derived from the focus group transcripts and the survey responses were tabulated. The researcher used constant comparative methods to reveal conceptual themes and emerging theories. Comments from the survey were analyzed deductively, as well as inductively using the themes from the focus groups. This data was compared to quantitative sets of data previously collected from each cohort of RTR graduates as part of the university system's general program assessment. The analysis of focus groups and surveys was then used to determine which program graduates with whom to do field visits in their current teaching context.

The purpose of the field observation and interview was to further document the self-reported levels of preparation by the graduate and to meet with other teachers and administrators from the partner schools to further inform the themes from the focus groups and surveys. These

visits also helped to determine in what ways the RTR program might have contributed to the graduates' choice to work in a rural school and what qualities of the rural school contributed to the teachers staying there. Observation data and interview notes were used to confirm or deny themes from the previous data sets.

Program Coursework: The Community Study

There are a plethora of teacher education programs to prepare urban teachers, but very few that address the needs of rural contexts (Schafft, 2016). The RTR program was designed with a goal to prepare more teachers for rural schools and therefore course readings and assignments addressed research and theories about rural education, which was a departure from the typical teacher preparation program at CSU, Chico. One RTR graduate noted: "The teachers that I teach with now are surprised that I went into a credential program that focused on rural schools" (focus group 1).

All students completed a major assignment in the summer before they began teaching; as a group, students conducted a community study of the rural town where they would spend their residency (see Appendix). As part of this project, the group spent time in the community, walking the area nearest to their schools, creating a map designating resources in the community, and researching information about the school. In the assignment students were asked to focus on the assets and strengths of the community and were encouraged to meet some local citizens. The purpose of this assignment was to inform and/or challenge any preconceived ideas they might have had about this rural place, and rural places in general. Theobald and Wood (2010) explain that negative constructions of rurality go as far back as seventeenth-century Europe and have proliferated with globalization and mass media. It is therefore necessary to address the narratives that incoming candidates had about rural places, even when they might have come from those

places.

The community study assignment also was intended to encourage the students to begin to attach themselves to a place where they would become more than residents but seek a sense of inhabitation. Orr (2013) writes, “Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness (p. 187). Gruenewald (2003) suggests rural education can be enhanced by place-conscious pedagogy because it becomes more relevant to the lived experience of students and teachers, and accountability is reconceptualized so that places matter to educators, students, and citizens in tangible ways... furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there. (p. 620)

Throughout their yearlong placement, residents were encouraged to engage with activities outside of the school community and to connect their curriculum to their place so that they might nurture connectedness in their students.

Findings

The yearlong residency in one classroom appeared to have a major impact for most of the graduates. All but three survey respondents credit the residency as a major factor in their sense of preparedness overall and 84% reported that being in one classroom for a full year was important in preparing them to work collaboratively. Across both the survey and the focus groups, participants felt very confident about their preparedness to teach. When asked what aspects of the program most contributed to their sense of preparedness, 34% included “the rural context” in their top five.

All but two of the 70 survey respondents felt they were prepared to work collaboratively with other professionals. In related questions, all but one person felt prepared to ask for assistance that leads to professional growth and 97% reported that they had been sought out by their colleagues for their perspectives on teaching. The majority of respondents credit the co-teaching and co-planning model and the full year in a school with professional development communities. The cohort model (having the same classmates throughout all the coursework) was cited as supportive by 83% of respondents. Some graduates pointed to the importance of collaboration in understanding how to respond to issues in their rural communities: “I think the other thing too that was important about our program in general is the fact that we were all in the same types of schools, all in these rural settings, Title I settings, and hearing how each different community was maybe dealing with or approaching their types of students and learning the different ways and that kind of thing” (focus group 2).

In the focus groups and the survey, the one issue that came up repeatedly, about which some of the graduates felt under-prepared, was the negative life circumstances of many of their students. Educators have begun to refer to these traumatic conditions as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) (Center for Youth Wellness, 2014). One of the counties in which the residents were placed had the highest ACE scores in the state (Center for Youth Wellness, 2014). “I guess I wasn’t prepared for the fact that because of the shortage of counselors and psychologists, that they’ve cut out of schools, it’s really hard to teach when you have to cater to children who have moms and dads in rehab and in jail and they know it and another child whose dad held up another store and is in jail and they go visit him on the weekends” (focus group 1). In the survey, 76% reported that they did feel prepared by the program to meet the needs of students living with trauma, but in the qualitative data, a variety of community concerns

surfaced. “It’s definitely culture shock...but because there’s no industry, the drugs have taken over and so unfortunately, I had to call on a parent, they were arrested. I never thought as a teacher I was going to be in the position to watch one of my student’s parents get cuffed in front of carpool. You don’t expect that” (focus group 2). One focus group participant said “especially meth, in rural areas being more prevalent and that hugely affects your classroom because of the home lives and the baggage” (focus group 1).

Though many of the graduates expressed concerns about their ability to support kids who had challenging home lives, at least one person related to those challenges. “I was that drug house, welfare child that my teachers looked out for me. So I was prepared for all of that. I was prepared for the small hick town. I was prepared for kids coming in that had abuse issues or any kind of thing that would prevent them from speaking out in class, or knowing that your dad got taken to jail the night before for beating your mom, or whatever it was. What I wasn’t prepared for was the language issues– it was the emerging bilinguals that we faced every day that I really wasn’t prepared for” (focus group 1). This candidate’s perspective was atypical; 94% of survey respondents said they felt prepared to meet the needs of English learners. However, this example speaks to the ways in which a teacher’s life experience, or lack thereof, impacts their sense of competency. Researchers in this study sought to understand to what extent the experience of having grown up rural, or not, affected the sense of preparation for teaching in rural settings.

Researchers observed a graduate who had been teaching three years after the RTR program, in her sixth grade classroom in a rural community. The teacher noted that she felt very comfortable teaching in a rural community because she had grown up in one, and although it was not the community in which she currently taught, she also lived in a small town nearby. But her concerns for her rural students were not unique to a rural context. In our interview, she said:

The home and family is the basic unit of society and in education and government we're putting pressure on teachers and schools to provide more, but we only get them for six hours. I see a huge rise in behavior issues, depression and anxiety, so many just need attention, so they resort to getting attention however they can. When they are on task, they are great smart kids, but they just need more relationship. Until we do something to help families to help themselves, because I don't think the answer is to provide more before and after school time. (personal communication, May 8, 2017)

Preparation for Rural Schools

Walker-Gibbs, Ludecke, and Kline (2015) theorize that the preparation of teachers for rural schools is directly influenced by “an individual’s conceptions and experiences of rurality” (p. 81). Teachers who are raised rural are more likely to live and teach in rural places (Reininger, 2012), and those who are not, are less likely to choose rural contexts (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). “So for me I continue to work in the rural schools just because I grew up in it; it’s basically all I know. I really like that experience” (focus group 2). Although 12 of the survey respondents who reported having grown up rural were not seeking jobs in rural places, it was true that the majority of respondents who had grown up rural reported that they had sought rural jobs at the completion of RTR.

Both survey responders and focus group participants noted that they chose rural because that is what they knew or where they were currently living. For example, one focus group participant said, “I own a house here in town and I have family in town. Everywhere around here is rural, so if you’re going to work here and be in this area, and if you’re going to stay here, of course, then we have to stay in the program” (focus group 1). Two teachers who had been recruited as paraprofessionals in one of the RTR partner districts described how they completed

the program and sought jobs in their home district. “We both worked for our school district for several years before being teachers there. It was understanding the climate, the population, the clientele that we were dealing with. It was important to me” (focus group 1).

Corbett (2016) has noted one classic problem in rural education research has been an insensitivity to differences across contexts; “as the old saying goes, if you have seen one rural community, you have seen . . . well, one rural community” (p. 278). The data supported this, in that having grown up rural didn’t necessarily prepare candidates for the rural communities in which they were placed. “I think I came very quickly to understand that there are different types of rural experiences. I grew up in a very small rural farming community. We didn’t have a stoplight; everybody went and hung out at the store on the corner after school. My experiences are that nobody in my community struggled with money issues, we didn’t have the poverty . . .you’re walking into that rural different perspective or different lens; it was eye opening” (focus group 1).

In the survey, nearly half (14/32) who said they did not have a rural upbringing also replied that they did not seek rural jobs: “I’m moving to Los Angeles, so yeah, probably I would work in a rural school, if I was willing to live in a more – so to me Chico is small. Where I’m from, Chico is rural in my perspective, so likely not” (focus group 1). One focus group participant said, “Being totally honest, my interest wasn’t in rural populations. I was really interested in being able to get my credential and my Masters in one year, and I was interested in working with disadvantaged, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, not so much rural” (focus group 1). Unfortunately, one survey respondent who identified as Mexican/Hispanic, who did not grow up rural and was not interested in teaching rurally, noted in the final comment section: “I would really really, really suggest the openness of the community to diversity be

taken into account when placing your residents in rural communities. No one should feel unwelcome during their first experience in teaching due to their nationality” (survey response, #38).

Impact of RTR Program on Going Rural

Program researchers elicited information that might help determine whether or not this program encouraged more graduates to seek out jobs in rural districts. Although the survey data is not comprehensive, this data could begin to point at how effective the RTR program was in encouraging teachers, who might not typically choose a rural school, to “go rural.” Sixteen of the survey respondents reported that they a) did not have a rural upbringing, b) agreed (ten *strongly agreed*) that they sought jobs in rural places and c) were likely to stay rural (two were unsure). Although program candidates were not asked before they started the program if they were seeking to teach in rural places, the survey did ask what factors most influenced their decision to apply to RTR. Six of the 16 respondents in this group (those who did not grow up rural but were seeking rural jobs) said the fact that they would be placed in a rural context was in their top four reasons for choosing this program. This data may indicate that those six were in some way predisposed to the possibility of locating in a rural place, so the pool of potential graduates to be observed and interviewed in a field visit narrowed to ten.

The question remained about what may have influenced the ten remaining respondents in this group – those that did not grow up rural, did not choose RTR for the rural context, but after graduating sought rural jobs, and wanted to stay rural. To what extent did the RTR program influence their inclination to teach in rural contexts? One member of the focus group admitted that she looked for any job, and learned to love her rural school:

I just wanted to get out and work and I applied everywhere locally because this is where I wanted to be and maybe it started out as I just wanted any job and [nearby small town] just happened to be the only school that hired me... Now that I'm there and this is into my fourth year, my husband's like, I hate that you have to drive there, and there's so many things about this school because it's a rural school that – there's so many things that outweigh other things... now that I've been there, there's just something about the experience that wants me to stay working with these underdogs. (focus group 2)

The ten respondents were analyzed in terms of suitability for follow up interviews and observations; accessibility to their current location was also a factor. Of the ten, two of them did not agree to both an observation and an interview so they were discarded and the list narrowed to eight. In order to narrow down the list for follow up data collection, the responses to two survey questions were examined. Those questions were: “In your opinion, what are the benefits to students of being in a rural school? (please specify)” and “In your opinion, what are the challenges students face from being in a rural school? (please specify)”

Perspectives on the Benefits and Challenges of Rural Schools

The responses to the survey questions regarding the benefits and challenges of rural schools were analyzed with respect to the dispositions about rurality. Sharplin (2002) describes the binary discourse of preservice teachers with respect to expectations of teaching in rural and remote areas. Her research found that pre-service teachers “rely on narrow stereotypes of rural and remote teaching. They hold, sometimes simultaneously, images of rural and remote teaching as an idyllic retreat and outback hell” (Implications, para 7). The RTR program sought to instill strengths-based perspectives about students and a view of rural places that included hope and opportunity.

Based on their combined responses to the survey questions, respondents would be selected from the group of eight (who did not grow up rural, did not select RTR because it was rural, but chose to go *and* stay rural, and agreed to a visit). Two graduates both reported that they felt prepared to be an effective teacher in all of the categories, and that they engaged in their community beyond school-sponsored activities. Both indicated that they had positive relationships with their RTR mentors with whom they were still in contact. Both indicated that the action research process prepared them to use data to reflect on their teaching. In order to determine which survey respondent would warrant a follow-up visit by researchers that would include an interview and an observation, their answers to the questions about benefits and challenges were analyzed for asset-based dispositions. An example of someone who was not chosen for follow-up was a respondent who noted she was not engaged in the broader community beyond school-sponsored activities and wrote that the reason for staying rural was “Providing a positive and safe environment for students and encouraging students to push themselves to be better. Believing in students that family members may not believe in.” One of the candidates had taken a teaching position in one of the RTR partner districts, so she was selected for an in-person visit, which also included an interview with additional members of the school staff associated with the RTR program.

This is home and always has been... since right after I got over being placed here: A Case Study

Melissa (a pseudonym) grew up in an urban area of southern California, with 700 students in her high school class. She went to Chico for her undergraduate degree and began to feel at home there after a couple years. When she entered the RTR program after graduating with her bachelor’s degree, she was assigned to her rural school and she was not pleased about it. She had not heard good things about this place and even after conducting the community study in the

summer course, she did not begin that placement feeling very confident. But, she came to love the people and the school, and soon after completing RTR, she accepted a permanent teaching position in that district. In her survey responses, Melissa wrote that her reason for staying rural was “I love the close community and the love and support our school campus has for all our students and families. There really isn't anything quite like working in a rural setting.” Melissa had previously worked for several years as an after school teacher and instructional aide and had been teaching for five years since completing the RTR program when researchers visited her at her school. When asked in the survey what the benefits of a rural school were for students, she wrote, “Smaller grade-level teams and school in general. We tend to have more chances to interact with our families outside the school setting. The teachers and staff are either from the area or deeply committed to the community where rural schools are located. There are generations of teachers and students in the school.” In her interview, Melissa spoke about how the school staff feels like a family and about how invested they are in the children of this community. “No one says ‘your kid’ – we always say ‘our kids’.” The principal had been a graduate of the school and most people who work there, tend to stay there for their whole career. Melissa commented during the site visit, “I intend to retire from Room 3.” Melissa credits, in part, her residency experience in the RTR program to her feelings of belonging at this rural school because she never felt like a guest at the school, she always felt like a teacher from the beginning.

In her survey responses, Melissa described the challenges of rural schools as: “Lack of parental involvement on the school level can be tough. I think the biggest challenge that faces the largest percentage of my kiddos is lack of resources or access to resources that families/students in larger more suburban or urban areas have. Even in 2017 a surprising number of our kiddos

don't have a computer at home and even more don't have access to the internet off school campus. Some parents need supports to help their students and many must work many, many hours in order to provide adequately for their families.” Melissa shared in her interview that collaboration and the collective ownership of the school and its students are how they are able to respond to the challenges. When a teacher or a student is struggling, all of the teachers rally to find ways to support them. Melissa said, “I’ve never felt alone in handling a student situation.”

Melissa lives in Chico and commutes to her rural school, as do the majority of teachers in that district. She appreciates the amenities of a bigger town, and belongs to a gym and a church where she has met many friends. She noted that if she had a family she might consider moving closer to her school, but the commute doesn’t bother her. Her morning coffee gets her going in the morning and she decompresses on the way home. She said, “After I got comfortable with the commute, I never wanted to work anywhere else.”

Collaboration and a Strong Sense of Community

In a field interview with RTR mentor teachers and administrators in Melissa’s district, they echoed some of her comments about the collaborative atmosphere, often referred to as familial. Both mentors teachers and administrators praised the RTR program’s focus on professional development communities and opportunities for collaboration with other educators, not only for the residents but for the mentor teachers as well. The mentor teachers credit the yearlong residency for creating a sense of investment in the school community and in the kids. One teacher noted that the passion to work together “rubs off on you and makes you want to be a better teacher.” All of the mentors reported being in contact with most of their previous residents, continuing to support one another in the challenges and practice of teaching.

Developing the case study about Melissa allowed researchers to look deeply at one graduate who appeared to have been “converted” to the idea of teaching in a rural school through her experience in the RTR program and at that particular rural school. Data suggests that in this case, the high levels of support and collaboration among the staff creates a school climate that feels affirming and inclusive and results in teachers wanting to stay teaching there, many for their whole career. This type of climate also contributes to the confidence and hope teachers need to address the many challenges associated with the life experiences, such as poverty and trauma, of the students who live in this rural community. This type of confidence implies that teachers are more likely to maintain a strengths-based perspective.

It is difficult to point to one aspect of the RTR program that was most influential in preparing effective teachers for rural schools; however, it is clear from the data presented here that program features that most contribute to building a strong collaborative community of educators both among the preservice teachers and in the partner schools, creates conditions that support both the recruitment and retention of teachers.

Further Research

Melissa, like many rural teachers in the CSU, Chico region, commutes from Chico to her school in a smaller town. Additional data will be collected during visits to graduates who did not grow up rural, did not choose RTR because it was rural, but have decided to work *and* live in a rural town. Although residing in a place does not always equate inhabitation (see Orr, 2013), it does potentially increase the connectedness a teacher can have to the students and the community. Further interrogation of the program assessment data may uncover some findings with respect to this.

Program directors expected that the forgivable loan for service in high needs schools would encourage graduates to work in rural schools, at least in the short term, however the research literature has indicated these types of incentives have limited success (e.g. Hammer et al., 2005). Within these data sets, when asked why they chose to teach rural, very few of the graduates pointed to the money as the reason for seeking rural jobs. One reason might be that there are a variety of high need non-rural schools that would qualify for loan forgiveness. One focus group participant who grew up urban noted that she did start out working in a rural school in order to meet her “service obligation” but stayed because she loved being a part of that community. In this case, this type of financial incentive was only successful because her sense of belonging further encouraged her to stay. This theme of connectedness and belonging has surfaced in some of the RTR graduates data, but it is also appearing in program interviews with rural schools in the region where they have had success with retention of teachers. CSU, Chico faculty are pursuing further research to better understand how this type of school climate can be supported through partnerships between the rural school and the university.

Although the RTR program ended with completion of the federal grant, that successful experience led to CSU, Chico receiving another TQP grant for the Residency in Secondary Education (RiSE) program (<http://www.csuchico.edu/soe/rise/index.shtml>). RiSE is modeled closely after RTR, partnering with rural districts, employing co-teaching, and using action research as the Masters culminating activity. Instead of elementary teachers, the new program prepares secondary teachers specifically in the high need areas of math, science, English, and special education. The careful attention to rural contexts has continued in the RiSE program and also has begun to spread to other teacher preparation pathways. Future research will focus on building interdisciplinary partnerships in the partner schools.

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Appendix: School and Community Study

There is an old adage “It takes a village to raise a child.” Although children spend a major part of their childhood in school, there are many people in a community that contribute to a child’s education. This assignment will assist you in learning about community, the ways in which they interact with K-12 schools, and how these relationships may figure into (or not) a democratic approach to schooling. Below are some of the activities that will support you to complete the assignment.

1. Description of the district and your school (group presentation)

Use the school/district handbook and/or website or other resources available to you.

- A. Include a description of your school’s mission, demographics, facilities, etc.
- B. What local agencies or organizations provide services for the school/district?
- C. What programs do the school/district provide to serve ELL, SPED, gender non-conforming, students who are experiencing homelessness, or other students with specific schooling needs?
- D. What are some examples of democratic practices? (see course readings)

2. Community Map and Discussion Post (group post)

“A theory of place that is concerned with the quality of human-world relationships must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 624). Go to your assigned school and conduct a community walk. Draft a rough map of the neighborhood of the school (5-8 block radius). What qualities contribute to a “sense of place” (Wilson, 1997, p. 191). (see check list online)

After you have mapped your school community with your group, discuss the strengths and challenges presented by it. How is it we construct a neighborhood as “good” or a “bad”? How do we come to value particular characteristics? What aspects of a neighborhood are most important and to whom? What aspects did you notice that may not be included on this list? How are/might “nourishing habitats” be cultivated in this place? (Wilson, 1997, p. 191) How can you imagine students might personalize this place? What type of place-based learning might occur here? Have one person post a brief summary of this discussion on the Community Walk discussion board in BBL. Reference this discussion, where possible, in your final individual paper.

3. Meet community members (individual)

You are provided multiple days to visit the community under study. “Where in a community, for example, might students and teachers witness and develop forms of empathetic connection with other human beings? How might these connections lead to exploration, inquiry, and social action?” (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 316). See online for a set of questions.

4. Present group findings (group presentation)

As a group, you should highlight your community map, any pertinent information about your community study, connections to “habits of place” (Budge, 2006) and a formal presentation of community resources and place-based curriculum ideas that can be used in a future presentation to your school/district colleagues.

5. Analyze community information, and your role in preparing students in a democracy (individual)

Synthesize the data you collected about the school and community, refer to any information you gained from your tour, your interview, and interactions with the community members, and reference the readings from class or other research you have read.

Some suggested questions to address are:

- What is your overall initial impression about this place? What is the role of the school(s) in the community? How does this compare to what you've read about rural schools? (refer specifically to group discussion and agency information)
- How does this information impact the ways you think about working in this community?
- Where do you think the "heartbeat" of the community is and what makes you think that?
- What examples of place-based learning can you imagine happening there?
- What questions do you have or will you pursue as a result of what you have learned?
- How does this information inform your purpose for teaching?
- Describe specific ways that you (will) use this community information to enact these philosophical beliefs in your practice.

"From the perspective of democratic education, schools must provide opportunities for students to participate meaningfully in the process of place making, that is, in the process of shaping what our places will become" (Gruenewald 2003, p. 627).