Multiple Points of Contact: Promoting Rural Postsecondary Preparation through School-Community Partnerships

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Formal and informal partnerships between rural schools and their communities can provide a wide range of supports for all students, but particularly those from low-income families. In this analysis of six small rural school districts in Virginia we show how the broad participation of community groups and individuals supports academic achievement as well as preparation and aspirations for postsecondary education. Results demonstrate that school-community partnerships provide multiple points of contact for students that buttress the efforts of school personnel by extended educational opportunities outside the classroom and by meeting the needs of low-income students when parents and teachers are unable to do so.

Key Words: Rural, college preparation, school-community partnerships.

Within rural education research, postsecondary preparation and aspirations are most often linked to family and school factors, with community factors receiving minimal consideration (Apostal & Biden, 1991; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). Even studies that claim an “ecological” approach seldom consider the role of the local community in actively promoting educational values and outcomes (for example, Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001). However, community members and resources can contribute to school success, creating learning opportunities grounded in local culture and heritage, for-profit and non-profit organizations, and natural and historical sites and resources (Bauch, 2004; Combs & Bailey, 1992). Relationships established among students and community members through formal and informal learning and mentoring opportunities can confer social capital and provide information about pathways to careers and postsecondary education that might otherwise be unavailable, in particular to low-income students (Bauch, 2004; Beaulieu & Israel, 2005; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Also, school-community connections provide a sense of place and identity that provide stability and continuity despite economic stressors (Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Although evidence supports the importance of community contributions to school success (Combs & Bailey, 1992; Decker & Decker, 2003; Sanders, 2006; Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 1997) a full analysis of the ways that school-community partnerships promote rural students’ educational attainment and postsecondary aspirations has not been conducted. In this study we examine six small, rural, high poverty school districts in Virginia. The guiding question for this study was, in what ways to formal and informal school-community partnerships, individually and as a group, promote postsecondary readiness and ambition among low-income students?

Review of Literature

To frame the study we began with a review of literature focusing on four inter-related sub-topics: ways that rural areas and schools benefit one another, school-level and community-level factors that influence the success of rural students, formal and informal school-community partnerships, and postsecondary access in the rural context.

School and Community-Level Reciprocal Benefits

Prior research demonstrates the potential – if not actual – beneficial symbiosis between rural localities and their schools. For example, public K-12 education can be a source of local revitalization, workforce preparation, community leadership, and economic vitality (Combs & Bailey, 1992; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Lyson, 2002). Similarly, rural communities can contribute to the success of schools in a variety of ways. Communities may provide social capital through mentoring and positive influence relationships (Isernhagen, 2010; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001; Lerner, 2005); in addition, they may offer formal and informal job shadowing, apprenticeship, and internship opportunities (Bauch, 2004; Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 2006; Sanders, 2006; Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 1997).
and they generally reinforce the importance of academic success among individual students and within the community at large (Harmon & Schaft, 2009; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

School-Level and Community-Level Factors

Typically, studies of rural school success focus on school-level factors such as collaborative leadership (Chance, Work, & Larchick, 1991), teacher morale (Battistich, et al., 1995), and student-centered planning (Chance & Segura, 2009). Although school factors may have the greatest direct impact on student achievement, sub-elements of the community also play important roles (Bauch, 2004; Combs & Bailey, 1992; Irvin et al., 2010; Khattari, Riley, & Kane, 1997). Bauch (2004) identifies six types of family-school connections that matter for school success: social capital, sense of place, parental involvement, church ties, school-business-agency relationships, and community as a curricular resource. Although locally-based civic entities (churches, businesses, and agencies) are important elements for rural educational success, Bauch focuses on the implications of these school-community ties for educational leadership and does not fully explore the full range of residents and groups who promote student success. Researchers have also focused on particular community groups, such as churches, that often play important roles in reinforcing academic values, providing accountability, tutoring, and mentoring, and creating forums where education-related issues can be discussed (Irvin, et al., 2010; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Timmermans & Booker, 2006).

Formal and Informal School-Community Partnerships

Research on school-community partnerships advances the importance of the involvement of local organizations and businesses through formalized agreements with specific measurable objectives (Decker, Decker, & Brown, 2007; Jones & Maloy, 1988; Sanders, 2006; Wright, Stegelin, & Hartle, 2007). Agreements between schools and resource-providing entities can take many forms and serve many goals, based on the resources of the partnering group, the longevity and frequency of the relationship, the needs and vision of the school, and other factors (Sanders, 2006). In one of the few school-community partnership studies set in a rural context, Combs & Bailey (1992), found that despite a dearth of local entities available for such alliances, even a small number cooperative relationships of this type can positively impact school climate, produce a stronger more visible link between school and community, and contribute to community empowerment by mobilizing local resources to help students think about and work at pressing local problems. Combs & Bailey used the term “alliances” to describe positive relationships between school and community. Other researchers de-emphasize these formal agreements in favor of shared commitments to and responsibilities for creating a local environment that is student-centered and broadly pro-educational (Decker & Decker, 2003). In combination, these two approaches highlight the value of particular targeted agreements as well as large-scale and broad-based support across the community. However, studies of either type seldom consider the link between these programs and supports and preparation for postsecondary education.

Postsecondary Access in the Rural Context

Educational researchers have highlighted the complex and at times contradictory positions of postsecondary education within rural communities (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Gibbs, 1998; McGrath, Swisher, Elder, & Conger, 2001). A segment of writers has criticized local education systems for serving as an exit point for “good” students from rural communities, making educators and postsecondary education either implicitly or explicitly responsible for “brain drain” and academic sorting by social class (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Donaldson, 1986; Sherman & Sage, 2011). However, McDonough (2004) suggests that place identity can bind even talented rural students to their communities in ways that inhibit postsecondary aspirations and attainment.

Other scholars have sounded a more hopeful note about the role of schools, educators, and education in rural areas (Gibbs & Cromartie, 1994; Kelly, 2009; Woods, Doeksen, & Clair, 2005). Contrary to Carr & Kefalas (2009), Petrin, Schaft, and Meece (2012) found that local economic context, rather than the direct influence of educators, contributed most to the out-migration of rural youth. Even among those planning to depart, a noticeable cohort, known as Returners, shaped their collegiate plans to maximize the possibility of returning to their home communities. Rather than contributing to permanent departure, discussions with adults about future plans reinforced aspirations to remain. Other researchers (Gibbs & Cromartie, 2004; Kelly, 2009; Wright, 2012) develop this point further, arguing that returning students are better equipped to serve the needs of their rural communities because of their broad experiences.
Nevertheless, the role of formal and informal school-community partnerships in post-secondary preparation and aspiration has not been well researched, in part because school-community partnership literature tends to focus on K-12 success and not the implications of these relationships for further education. Although we acknowledge that education plays a complex and at times a negative role in small rural communities, we also observe through this study and the existing literature (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2012) that improved opportunity for all students through high quality education maximizes life choices for individuals and may offer a key local resource for future community vitality.

**Methods**

This study employed a mixed-methods design that combined the in-depth personal perspectives of individual participant interviews with the broad contextual and demographic data derived from a teacher survey instrument (Creswell, 2008). This paper, however, reports only the qualitative data gained from participant interviews. Participating districts in the state of Virginia met three criteria: They had fewer than 2000 total students, K-12; they had above the state average of 37% Free and Reduced Price Meal (FRPM) program qualifiers, a proxy for low-income status (participant rates varied from about 55% to about 75%), and they were located in rural areas of the state, determined by relative population density and proximity to urban and metropolitan areas. Demographic, achievement, and migration data were also considered as the initial qualifying pool of 25 districts was reduced to six final participants. Our selections were made based on the most compelling combinations of academic successes, challenging demographics and other contextual variables (socio-economic status, migration, and other factors) so that our final selections were likely to reflect the variations found throughout the state. Participant districts all demonstrated points of academic success with low-income students, although the challenges remaining varied by location. Six school districts, referred to here as Riverside, Heritage, Greenfield, Western, Timberland, and Twinsburg were invited and agreed to participate with approval from district administrators and school boards, though under the conditions of anonymity.

**Data Collection and Analysis Process**

Seventy-nine individuals across the six school districts participated in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Participants included school personnel, non-profit and public agency employees, civic and special interest group representatives, business leaders, higher education employees, education activists, religious leaders, and key local cultural informants. As is often the case in low-population rural areas, many of our participants filled several formal and informal roles in multiple categories. For example, one local business owner headed a non-profit community education foundation and had served on the school board. Potential interview participants were identified through a snowball process that began with the recommendations of school administrators who suggested individuals connected to community partnerships and to leadership positions in the community. From this list and our own research we invited participants to be part of the study. Each interview yielded additional participant recommendations, broadening the scope and input. All participants were advised about the nature of the study, the extent of their participation, and protections of anonymity and confidentiality. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and entered into Nvivo 9 ethnographic software for analysis. Through an emergent coding process we organized and analyzed interview transcripts, beginning with five themes (school-community partnerships, school-community topics, higher education topics, school topics, and local pressing local issues). These pre-established focal topics guided initial coding but we also maintained a pool of outlier themes so that new and contradictory patterns could emerge, challenge, and become part of our final analysis. From these initial codes and our extensive field notes we developed a set of preliminary themes and findings per district that were member-checked for accuracy with a selection of participants before identifying conclusions for this report. For example, in Timberland School District we identified nine major themes: economic context, social context, existing partnerships, community attitudes toward college going, school division attitudes and behaviors related to achievement and college going, the role of parents, the role of facilities, non-school educational resources, and programs that support post-secondary preparation. Funding for this study was provided by a federal College Access Challenge Grant held by the Commonwealth of Virginia and administered by SCHEV, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

**Defining Terms**

In this study we elected to use the term “school-community partnership” since it relates to an
established sub-field of educational research. Based on Sanders’ (2006) definition, we define school-community partnerships as formal and informal mechanisms of support delivered by local persons or entities to promote schools’ educational goals for student achievement and postsecondary aspirations. This definition is broadly inclusive of types of involvement (including material, social, economic, human, and knowledge-based resources) and sources of involvement so long as they have a legitimate local presence (businesses, non-profit organizations, public agencies, social organizations, and individuals).

The focus of this study is community supports for academic preparation that leads to postsecondary aspirations, access, and attainment. We intend “postsecondary education” to include any kind of post-high school education that results in a degree or professional credentials, including four-year, two-year, technical, and other types of education.

Findings

Within the six case study districts, community partners contributed to the college readiness and ambition of students through services, activities, and social influence in five categories, from specific to general: by supporting academic and career success, providing information and advising, building aspirations and socialization to postsecondary education, creating a formal and informal economy of support, and developing a community commitment to the value of postsecondary education.

Supporting Academic and Career Success

For students to even consider postsecondary education, the barrier of qualification (taking the right courses and passing them) is the foremost hurdle that must be cleared (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). Given the purposes of public education, the amount of direct instructional time allotted, and the extent of support resources and educational activities provided in and through the schools, teachers and school administrators are the primary points of contact for students’ academic development.

Nevertheless, in this study community individuals and groups reinforced and supplemented the efforts of school personnel in four ways. First, community partners provided academic tutoring in and outside of the school setting. In some cases tutoring was focused on a particular subject. In one district local bank employees provided regular math assistance to elementary students. Academic tutoring outside of the school context is a form of support that may go unnoticed by school personnel. In Twinsburg, a church held tutoring nights where retired and current educators helped students with math and reading skills and assignments over refreshments in the church basement. Tutoring was offered by businesses, non-profits, public agencies, and faith-based groups across our six case districts. However, tutoring initiatives sometimes suffered from inconsistent delivery, both in quality and quantity.

Second, in-school academic efforts were often supported through donations of supplies and materials that improved the instructional process. In some cases donations were simply paper, pencils, and other basics otherwise available in minimal quantities (or not at all) due to budget cuts. In other cases teachers were able to write mini-grant requests to their community education foundation or another local partner for specific resources that would improve the delivery of course materials. For example, in Heritage School District a teacher received a mini-grant to make sturdy math flashcards that could be reused by subsequent classes.

Third, community partners in many case districts offered supplementary learning experiences that built self-efficacy and skills applicable to future academic and career contexts. In Riverside School District, an extension campus of the community college offered leadership training opportunities to local high school students. In several locations, civic organizations such as the Rotary Club held regional leadership seminars tied to small scholarships that covered travel and associated costs. In another case, a public agency developed a freshman seminar course for 9th grade students, exposing them to career planning and basic life skills such as financial management. This program was adopted by the district and was run as part of the regular curriculum, demonstrating a deep level of trust and integration between the school and the community organization. Although these experiences may seem peripheral to college preparation, particularly for low-income students, they can provide exposure to new places, new ideas, and new social networks, expanding students’ imagination for future academic and professional opportunities, and contributing to self-confidence needed to function within new and different environments.

Fourth, many students in our case districts, and particularly students from underrepresented groups, are often part of social networks connected to particular language groups or religious communities. Several school administrators and education activists discussed ways that these informal networks and affiliations can be used to reinforce the importance of academic focus generally, or to draw attention to particular school and district areas of emphasis, such as family reading time. When we asked Bernice, a school counselor (who was African American) why
churches were a good avenue for disseminating messages from schools, she described how difficult it is to reach some of the students most in need of help: *Because a lot of your...students who are not very aware are your minorities. And for me, if we can get other adults involved, to know what's going on, they can help us spread the word. And if they don't come here for an after-school [activity], some of them will go to church. Or even if they don't go to church, there will be people who are close enough to them who do go who can help spread the word.*

Thus, harnessing the natural proclivity of social networks to spread information may be one important way that schools can distribute information and encourage academic focus.

**College Information and Advising**

With regard to college information and advising, Joyce, a college access organization employee was explicit about this challenge, stating: *These are...the higher risk kids. Not all of them in the program, but a lot of them...when I call them in one-on-one you could tell they didn't have a real perspective on the world after high school. Many students from low-income families come to the end of high school either with unrealistic expectations or no expectations for what they will do after graduation. Although teachers and school counselors are most often the first line of information (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2010), the volume of their responsibilities and number of students they serve can reduce the depth of individual student attention, despite their best efforts. In our case districts community partners augmented the work of school personnel in this area in two ways: by providing college information and by providing college advising.*

At most college and universities students are required to fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, whether they are seeking financial help or not. Low-income students whose parents are not familiar with the college-going process may not understand the importance of this document in the application and financial aid process. As a result, a wide variety of organizations in our case districts helped students complete the FAFSA, including religious groups, 4-H coordinators, public social services agencies, local college access providers, and local civic and special interest organizations. Some districts held a “college night” (either independently or in cooperation with a local or state organization) where students and families could receive help with this and other forms. Two of the districts participated in “Super Saturday” events, partnering with state education agencies and other school districts to complete requisite forms.

Low-income and first generation students often do not understand the many scholarships, grants, and loan options available, nor have they been informed about other requirements and processes, such as standardized test preparation and application timelines (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). In these functions college access provider organizations were especially adept, though by no means were they the only channels through which students received assistance. Many of the case study school districts participated in the federal GEAR-UP grant program that provides academic and college entry assistance to an entire academic cohort as they progress from eighth through twelfth grades. Other districts had local or regional access organizations, some of which focused on a small group of qualifying (usually by income level) students who received intervention services throughout their high school careers. Other programs, such as the Career Coaches (a locally-based advisement program funded and organized through Virginia’s community college system), offered help to any student, regardless of socio-economic background.

Second, community partners advised students about their college and career options, both expanding awareness and delivering sober assessments of possible choices. Advising came about most often either as part of the organization’s mission (such as Career Coaches and other access organizations) or through frequent contact that led to trusting relationships (such as faith-based organizations, certain social services organizations, or special interest groups). Often, these roles and relationships gave community partners a voice that was more extensive or more intensive than school personnel could provide. Wanda, who works for a state-based social services agency, described a situation where her level of intervention exceeded what school personnel were willing to give:

> *We had a student that had received a full ride last year to a college and the parent had no idea that it was a full ride. So on the last hour that scholarship was due the child came to me and said, "[Wanda], I'm not going to be able to do the scholarship." And I said, "Why?" and he said, "Well, my mom truly doesn't understand and she's looking at the numbers and she's thinking that she has to come up with all of this money." So, I took the child home and I sat and talked to the mom…. And she was very, very happy that someone came out to explain it to her.*

When asked if anyone from the school had tried to assist this student, Wanda replied:
To be honest, no one. …We just can’t sit back and say, "Ok the parents are not signing the papers." We have to go outside of the box and find out what’s going on. Why didn’t this parent do this? But the school is not going to go outside of the box. There are very few teachers that choose to go outside of the box. Other teachers are like "Ok, mom didn’t come in so she doesn’t care." I often preach to the teachers that it’s not that the parents do not care it’s that they don’t know how or know what to do.

From our interviews we know that in many instances school personnel did “go outside of the box”, to use Wanda’s expression, yet in other contexts they may have felt limited by their formal roles or may simply have been unaware of the full circumstances students face. In such instances, for students or families to have more than one point of contact and advisement creates a back-up system that can ensure that a crucial opportunity is not missed, as occurred in this case.

Socialization and Aspiration Experiences

Although some students do reach the end of their high school career without forming a post-graduation plan, many others develop interests and aspirations for further education through exposure to new places, new ideas, and education and career opportunities offered through community partnerships of two types: Special events and positive influences.

Special events. Particularly for students in isolated areas exposure to an array of cultural centers and activities, such as museums, plays, and art galleries, and natural and built environments, such as botanical gardens, historical sites, state parks, and urban areas, can be at first bewildering. However, these experiences can also inspire students to take an interest in new ideas, cultures, foods, places, and forms of expression. The connection between a broadened cultural palette and college-going may seem distant. Yet an expanded view and appreciation of various cultural art forms, modes of communication, music styles, and history allows students to understand and participate in diverse forms of expression creating opportunities for new perspectives of self and home culture. Questions about the nature of human existence, human purpose, and human ingenuity happen most persistently within the arts. Engaging in those conversations can draw students into new ways of thinking about and relating to the world regardless of their future place of residence. Beyond cultural aspirations, once students are exposed to new career and educational opportunities and the potential social and economic benefits that accompany them, they may have greater incentive to enroll in postsecondary education.

Typically, organizations with a consistent presence among students and within the schools (access organizations, 4-H, community education foundations, and many others) were most likely to offer trips to nearby businesses, cities, state and national parks, historical sites, and other sorts of guided cultural experiences. However, civic organizations, higher education institutions, and public agencies also sponsored trips to leadership seminars, regional or national writing or speech contests, or on-campus college introduction weekends for individuals or small groups. As well, traveling exhibitions, performance groups (music, theater, and others), or speakers were sponsored by local businesses or organizations to come to an area, providing a similar experience.

More directly, trips to colleges and college tours were an important staple in programs designed to inspire student achievement and college aspirations. Although some school districts such as Riverside had in place structured programs that included tours of nearby colleges and universities as early as seventh grade, in other districts these opportunities originated either from in-school sub-groups (clubs, advising groups, organizations), were arranged per-student, or were delivered by or through a variety of community organizations. Particularly for students in geographically isolated areas, a visit to a college campus helped them begin to imagine themselves in the role of a college student. Researchers have found these experiences to be particularly potent for students of historically underrepresented groups (Attinasi, 1989). Eating in a dining hall, touring dormitories and classrooms, walking among students on the quad are all activities to help make college life seem normal and accessible for students who may never have set foot on a college campus before. Even for low-income students in relative geographic proximity to a college or university, lack of transportation or general timidity towards a college campus may have kept them from attending sporting events, concerts, or educational experiences hosted for high school students that might otherwise have delivered this initial exposure. Michelle, a 4-H director in Western District, reflected on a student who particularly benefitted from this experience:

And in fact, there’s one child that didn’t think he was going to college, and I just heard he’s getting A’s and B’s at [college]. And until we started going to colleges, he wasn’t planning to go to college at all. It was a shame because he was, he had a lot going for him, he was very personable, but he needed to get to college, he
needed to see that there were other things out there and that he had what it takes to get there.

Positive influences. Tours and cultural events provide direct exposure but make an indirect case to students that their future plans should include some sort of postsecondary education. Directly, community partners of all types served as mentors and models, in many cases offering specific encouragement to students who may not have considered higher education before. Researchers note that even with the presence of college-going resources and opportunities, students often need this sort of direct injunction to personally believe that higher education is for them. In a study of Mexican-American young people, Attinasi (1989) noted that peer modeling by siblings, friends, and acquaintances who go to college and speak positively about their experiences significantly impacted high school student’s thinking about their own future plans. Similarly, within our study faith-based organizations were often places where this social influence was passed on through annual recognition of and celebration of high school and college graduates, through religious mentors who regularly checked grades and provided accountability for academic performance, and through individuals who directly encouraged students to consider postsecondary education. James, a pastor in Heritage School District described this function in his congregation:

Publicly we lift them up and we celebrate their success and we wish them well in their further endeavors and encourage [others in thinking that] college or furthering their education will be a part of it. I think it’s definitely encouraged, embraced. I haven’t seen anybody that says “well, just stay on the farm - this is your life here.” I think there is a general sense that we want you to go off and do better and to get an education.

Other groups, such as community education foundations, used the peer influence of recent graduates returning home from college during school breaks to talk about their experiences and encourage the rising classes to consider their college options. Influence from religious groups and other organizations can come in the form of encouragement to use school resources and seek out the information needed to advance toward college. A woman who works with the youth in her church discussed how she sends her students to the guidance counselors for help in addition to the assistance she provides as a former teacher.

Widening the circle, a common form of partnering that can lead to academic and postsecondary aspirations is to invite local professionals, business owners, and other local leaders to discuss not only the details of their careers, but to explain the steps they took to reach their current positions. In one school Susan, a guidance counselor, polled students on careers of interest and then invited community professionals in, to great effect:

So they come in and say “It’s really great to be a doctor but this is how many years of college it took, and this is how dedicated I had to be even in high school”. She was really good, the teacher that kind of helped us develop the class, in laying out some good questions for these people so they could say “These are some class that you might want to take in high school”, you know, “don’t take the easy road”. Or “These are some clubs that might be of interest to you” or “It’s really important for you to be involved in things outside of the school”.

Clearly, not only were career pathways described for students, but also the sorts of courses and extra-curricular activities necessary to set up future access to higher education. School personnel also discussed inviting in speakers from outside organizations and colleges and universities to talk about career and educational opportunities that students might not otherwise experience or understand. In one district the community college sponsored a program that targeted high risk African-American males by bringing in speakers who came from similar backgrounds and were able to relate to students in ways that teachers could not.

The Formal and Informal Economy of Support

The final two ways in which community partners support the college aspirations of local students, and in particular low-income students, are less concrete and can be more difficult to identify from any single action or event. However, in several of the school districts the accumulated and combined efforts and expectations of school and community stakeholders did create a palpable sense that education was a high priority and was supported across the community. This positive momentum was evident in the language community members and educators used when referencing education and from the efforts taken to actively support schools and students materially, financially, interpersonally, and programmatically.

In the hierarchy of student support systems, parents are most centrally and broadly responsible. Schools take a secondary place based on educational mission and mandates, and the community can act as a cohesive force, a safety net, and a resource to parents and schools. However, in areas with a low total population and a high percentage of low-income
residents, some parents may be unable to provide for the basic physical, psychological, and developmental needs of their children. Students bring deficits of preparation, development, and support to school, pressing the education system and the local community into roles typically occupied by parents. Throughout the study we heard how local school teachers and administrators gave of their own time and resources to quietly meet student needs for clothing, school supplies, uniforms, trips, and a myriad of other minor expenses, in addition to offering support, encouragement, and a listening ear to distressed or struggling students.

School personnel are not alone in these acts of self-sacrifice: the close and informal social circles that typify rural life in our case districts carried word of needs quickly, often to persons in community organizations. In some cases these organizations were specifically outfitted to meet such needs, but in many cases they also supplemented the efforts of parents and schools. At the heart of this behavior, and a theme echoed through all six of our case districts in different ways and to different degrees, was a strong sense of ownership and responsibility for students whose circumstances have dramatically disadvantaged them through no fault of their own. When asked to identify the key elements to students' success in this environment, Jennifer, a public agency-based college access provider, described the community as an essential part, reflective of comments offered by many study participants:

It’s the community support I think by far. It’s the encouragement of the community and many of us might see just like this one child, I’d give him money out of my kid’s account if I thought that would help him, and there are a lot of people that think that way. They sacrifice...to [help] this kid who needs the money to take the SAT or needs money for a college application. There’s a boat load of us that see the community support and the community need and we’re going to give to whomever. And it’s not just the agency people: its people within the church, its people within the community.... I think that’s what makes the difference. It’s the small community spirit.

Significantly, this participant linked community intervention not only to student success, but specifically to combined community efforts that remove barriers to college-going in addition to meeting basic student needs.

Community Commitment to the Value of Higher Education

Jennifer’s account of multiple points of local support describes community altruism and concern for the welfare of local young people. However, it also suggests a critical mass of community members—both individuals and organizations—committed to ensuring that students have the resources necessary to succeed academically and to pursue postsecondary education, as a reflection of shared school-community goals. Amber, a school administrator in Greenfield described the partnership of schools and community groups in terms of sharing a common purpose, rather than seeing the work of the school as an isolated enterprise:

I think they [community partnerships] are a very important part of it because...I think they’re really supporting the common vision and mission of the school division. ...I think it’s important that the student sees that the whole community supports the mission of the school, and it’s not just the school’s mission, it’s the community’s mission.

Amber’s statement identifies two of the most important reasons for school-community partnerships in small rural areas: functionally, partnerships provide resources that reinforce the educational foci of the district through experiences outside the classroom and enable students to pursue postsecondary goals through financial and logistical support. Symbolically, partnerships tell students that educational achievement is a value spanning the entire community, and not only within the walls of the school. Partnerships convey expectations that educational degree attainment of some type is possible for all young people. And, partnerships can convey a community vision for the type of place citizens are working to create.

Timothy, the director of a community college extension center, described the necessity of the whole community moving in a similar direction and focusing whatever limited resources are available toward a common goal. Paraphrasing entrepreneurship guru, Ernesto Sirolli, he said, the future of every community lies in capturing the energy, imagination, the passion of its people. Reflecting then on his own rural location, Timothy demurred: I don’t represent us as being all of the way there, but I do represent us as a community that has those kinds of conversations, and I would say that that’s different than many. Rather than looking outward for assistance from the state or from a major corporation, Timothy asserted that the focus must be on maximizing local resources and believing that the solution is primarily internal: We can’t always
depend on somebody to come here. We’ve got to build the capacity of people from within.

Conclusions

Study results show the rich confluence of community resources that can, with vision and coordination, significantly aid all local students, including those from low-income families. This range of supports supplements the work of school personnel by reinforcing educational goals and programs, building students’ self-efficacy and vocational imagination through connections to cultural, historical, natural, and other types of area resources, and by providing a safety net for students in need of additional assistance or encouragement. The most successful of our case study districts demonstrated a broad-based commitment to the value of school success and postsecondary preparation access for the betterment of the individual student and for the prosperity of the area. Although all six case districts were making positive strides toward educational improvement, districts were at different points with regard to establishing a widespread commitment to the value of education as an important local goal reflected in the types of cooperation between school personnel, local public officials, the business community, and the non-profit community. In the higher achieving school districts, stakeholders in a variety of political, educational, and community activist roles described high quality schools as a key to the success of the area and that required a total community commitment. The reward is a generation of young people prepared to contribute to society (whether in their community or another) and a school system that may be a selling point to business owners, developers, and professionals who may be attracted to the area as a result.

Limitations and Future Directions of Inquiry

The methodology and findings of this study present three limitations that also represent areas for future research. The locally grounded nature of case study research provides rich context and insight into participant experiences and sense making. However, findings are primarily indicative of the study area and are only logically generalizable to other locations and populations. Studies of college aspirations and school-community partnerships in other rural contexts (in the United States and elsewhere) may add new perspectives to the discussion begun here.

Second, our research efforts focused primarily on the impact of formal structures and mechanisms within rural communities. As a result non-participants (including many low-income residents, elderly residents, and residents for whom English is a second language) in formal educational or civic structures were largely left out of our study. We recognize the value of their perspectives and the informal natural helping networks (Libertoff, 1980) that may be important aspects of their information and resource gathering. Similar future studies should be attentive to non-structural avenues through which low-income residents build individual capacity, share resources, and develop future plans.

Third, our focus on community structures and the people who run them left out a very important constituent group: students themselves. Although excluding students was a strategic decision and not an omission, we also recognize that the impact of school-community partnerships needs to be considered from the student perspective if we are to fully understand the role of partnerships in rural areas.

Finally, the position of education in rural contexts has experienced a critical turn in recent years, often focusing on the damage done rather than the opportunities afforded by formal schooling (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2007; Sherman & Sage, 2011, among many others). This study joins other recent efforts (Petrin, Schafft, & Meece, 2012) that acknowledge the validity of these critiques and yet empirically demonstrate ways in which critical studies may deliver overly generalized results. We encourage researchers and practitioners to stay current in this ongoing conversation and consider what sorts of studies will offer thoughtful, robust, and actionable analysis that acknowledges these meaningful critiques.

References


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If We Get You, How Can We Keep You?

Problems with Recruiting and Retaining Rural Administrators

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The focus on instructional leadership has reached a crescendo with the waivers for No Child Left Behind (2002). The leadership of the principal is known to be a key factor in supporting student achievement; however, recruitment and retention of administrators in rural areas of the Midwest is very difficult. This survey research study explored the recruitment and retention strategies, as well as factors influencing the loss or retention of quality administrators reported by Midwest superintendents. The themes that emerged as successful recruitment strategies included ‘growing your own’ as the number one method of recruiting and retaining rural school administrators, salaries/benefits depending on location, emphasizing positive working conditions and climate/culture, and providing quality professional development. Retention strategies that worked well for rural schools were an emphasis on a positive school culture and climate, investment in professional development, and use of technology for mentoring along with increased benefits.

Key Words: Rural administrator, rural recruitment strategies, rural retention strategies, instructional leadership, grow your own.

The school principal plays a central role in education. This person is seen as a building manager, administrator, politician, change agent, and instructional leader. During the recent past, the most sought-after type of principal is an instructional leader who can create an atmosphere focused on teaching and learning to improve student achievement. According to Supovitz, Sirinides, & May (2010), research on the influence of the school principal on student achievement spans over 40 years, and as reported by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), “[t]he data from our meta-analysis demonstrates that there is, in fact, a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement” (p.3). In 2006, the Wallace Foundation report highlighted the connection between achievement and instructional leadership by saying, behind excellent teaching and excellent schools is excellent leadership—the kind that ensures that effective teaching practices don’t remain isolated and unshared in single classrooms…with our national commitment to make every single child a successful learner, the importance of having such a high-quality leader in every school is greater than ever. (p. 3)

According to Van Roekel (2008), principals shape the environment for teaching and learning by creating vibrant learning communities where collaboration among the adults helps every student fulfill his or her potential. Not only have studies considered the role of the principal important, but the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) have linked principals’ instructional leadership skills to academic achievement (National Education Association, 2008).

With principal accountability in the area of student achievement ever increasing, it is crucial principals lead schools in directions that positively impact student achievement. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated, given the perceived importance of leadership, “it is no wonder that an effective principal is thought to be a necessary precondition of an effective school” (p. 5). Considering the importance of the role of the principal, the selection of effective school principals is extremely relevant to schools’ success because districts are currently evaluated on student achievement. Therefore, it is not only a matter of the selection of effective principals; rather it is the retention of effective principals who can articulate a vision that will engage teachers, parents, the district,
and the larger community in the long term. Through administrative retention and school success, on-going student achievement can be better ensured. However, throughout the Western world, fallout from the standards/standardization agenda has resulted in potential leaders questioning educational leadership as a career path. Moreover, the aging of the baby boom generation has created a shortage of qualified principals in many educational jurisdictions. (Fink & Brayman, 2006, p. 62)

According to Young, Petersen, and Short (2002), filling vacant principalships has become problematic because the pool of candidates is growing smaller. Over the next few decades, as retirement rates of current principals increase, the problem will become compounded. Based on the findings of Cruzeiro and Boone (2009), “at a time when public schools in the US need new and dynamic leadership, finding those leaders will become increasingly difficult” (p.1). Nowhere is this a more urgent situation than in rural areas.

When attempting to staff rural schools with effective principals, school boards of education often find themselves at a disadvantage in recruiting and retaining administrators. This issue is one of importance for leadership and student learning in the United States because 10,000,000 students are served by rural schools (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). Rural schools are at a disadvantage when searching for new school leaders (Pjanowski, Hewitt, & Brady, 2009). Pjanowski et al. (2009) reported “Administrative openings in rural schools draw on average significantly fewer applications (14.6 in larger districts, compared with 6.8 in neighboring small districts), and this disparity appears consistent over time” (p. 91). Rural areas may not be as attractive as urban areas to principal applicants because “rural areas have experienced shrinking tax bases, shifting local economics, and brain drain among young people who move to more urban areas after high school graduation” (Ayers, 2011, p. 1-2).

Nevertheless, according to Beeson and Strange (2000), “there is a persistent attitude that if we close our eyes, sooner or later, one way or another, the ‘rural problem’ will just go away” (p. 63). However, this problem will not go away without significant investigation by districts so that they understand how to meet their unique needs and challenges. Rural leadership is more demanding because many districts have no middle management and depend on their administrators to carry additional responsibilities. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) noted expectations of rural principals include such things as helping on the playground, managing the Title I program, driving the school bus, working with special needs students and their families, and helping lead the curriculum revision efforts - not to mention cutting the lawn and assisting with banquets and graduation, sometimes in a short period of time. According to Cruzeiro and Boone (2009), “interruptions happen throughout the day and candidates need to know how to juggle many different tasks at the same time” (p. 6). Rural principals are often called upon to help make operational decisions for their districts in addition to serving both as a manager and an instructional leader (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012). To recruit and retain teachers, principals, and administrators in rural schools is even more difficult because of the lower salaries and increased isolation of many districts (Beeson & Strange, 2000).

Research has demonstrated administrators associate their working conditions with job satisfaction (Graham & Messner, 1998). When considering the working conditions in small, rural schools, many factors may play a part in the challenge of recruitment and retention of administrators. Cruzeiro and Boone (2009) cited factors such as lower pay, work without support of assistant principals and central office personnel, isolation from colleagues, as well as “poverty, underemployment, and most of the social problems that are found in urban centers” (p. 8).

Another area presenting significant need in rural regions is professional learning for leaders. “Principals influence learning, both for students and teachers. They are key to any reform focused on teaching and learning” (Killion, 2012, p. 3). However, principals can only provide this type of leadership if they themselves have received the appropriate training. “Successful principals shape the culture of schools, set clear expectations, and share leadership with others to create productive learning environments for students and staff” (Killion, 2012, p. 4). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty’s (2003) research indicated that schools with highly effective principals performed ten percentage points higher than similar schools led by average principals. Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2009) concluded schools led by highly effective principals improve student achievement from the 50th percentile to between the 54th and 58th percentile in just one year. Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) noted “The main underlying assumption is that instruction will improve if leaders provide detailed feedback to teacher, including suggestions for change. It follows that leaders must have the time, the knowledge, and the consultative skills needed to provide teachers support” (p.11).

However, the fact remains that in rural areas access to training to prepare principals to provide this leadership is often lacking. One way to overcome
this shortfall may be through the use of technology to develop learning networks for principals. At this time, “fewer [districts] are exploring the use of digital media for professional development communication, including interaction with colleagues beyond their schools and districts” (MetLife, 2008, p. 111). According to Pertridge (as cited in Von Frank, 2009), to move teaching and learning into the 21st Century educators must have access to a variety of communication media if they do not want to become stagnant; social learning is a means to learn from others in a way that is “just-in-time.” Utilizing technology can allow integration of professional learning and support when it is needed, how it is needed, and from people who are involved in similar activities. Almost all rural schools are currently integrating technology for distance learning; however, providing increased networking capabilities for professional learning could enhance the draw for new potential principals.

Going forward, rural districts must ensure professional development for administrators who feel a tie to the district and a commitment to both the school and the area students. Facing the escalating requirements of NCLB (2001), principals require both professional development and interactive technology to remain knowledgeable and up-to-date and to maintain the title of instructional leader. As Grimmert and Echols (2000) stated,

We suggest that to avoid this situation, it will be important to reconfigure the roles and responsibilities associated with leadership of schools. . . vital that district administrators find viable ways to support and challenge school administrators in a changing social, political, and cultural context . . . necessary to focus on nurturing leadership capacity in administrators and teachers, emphasizing vision, purpose, and relationships, not rules, rigid procedures, and mandates; emphasizing covenant, not contract. . . building norms of collegiality, openness, and trust. It is crucial that districts actively mentor a cadre of future administrators. (p. 341)

Many regions in the U.S. face difficulty in attracting and retaining adequately prepared school leaders (Quinn, 2002). The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) estimated almost one-fourth of all children live in communities with populations of less than 2,500 residents (Beeson, & Strange, 2000; Browne-Ferrigno, 2007). When considering the numbers of students residing in rural areas and the importance of their intellectual capital to the future of America, the issue of recruiting and retaining effective instructional leadership for these schools becomes even more apparent. These students need instructional leadership in their schools where the focus is on learning and improving student achievement in order for students to be prepared for their future.

Researchers and practitioners have examined how school principals create and maintain effective educational environments, but studies about ways to recruit and retain administrators for rural schools are limited (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005). However, Rosenkoetter, Irwin, and Saceda (2004) found when rural preparation required students to do their practicum in rural area it caused them to develop a deeper understanding of the context of this setting. They noted placement in rural areas allowed the development of peer networks among individuals with the same interests that can provide mutual support during times of stress, and thus increase the possibility of retention. Another way districts approach recruiting principals is the “grow your own” approach, which provides opportunities for teachers to engage in authentic leadership experiences with school administrators. Rosa (2003) indicated rural districts should anticipate possible administrative retirements and begin grooming successors several years in advance. Those practitioners already have an allegiance to the district and a tie to the community. Additionally, DeAngelis and O’Connor (2012) found issues related to working conditions presented themselves as issues to be addressed for both recruitment and retention. Among the working condition issues were salary, increased time commitment, paperwork requirements, issues with bureaucracy, and level of stress. All of these issues should be considered as rural school districts attempt to hire new administrators. Rural school districts must be proactive in searching for educational leaders because “the loss of leadership, experience, expertise, knowledge and wisdom has the potential to impact adversely on school quality and student learning” (Chapman, 2005, p. 2). Chapman (2005) advised the process should begin with identification of individuals with leadership capacity within the rural schools where it is in a disadvantaged area, and where there is difficulty in attracting good candidates for administrative positions.

Strong administrative leadership without constant turnover is more conducive to learning for both staff and students. Teachers become more effective with experience, as do principals, especially in their first three years (Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009). When a new principal transfers to a new school, research estimates it takes approximately five years to improve instruction and fully implement new policies and procedures to impact student achievement (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Effective principals make improvements in their first few years of leadership, but their effectiveness definitely...
increases over time. Therefore, it is more important than ever to examine the unique vulnerabilities such as benefits packages, reducing isolation, increasing involvement in the community, and administrative opportunities for growth in rural districts to reduce the turnover rates of administrators and find ways to address principal-candidate shortages. This requires district leaders in need of new administrative talent to generate non-stop efforts at successful strategies for both recruitment and retention (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002). In this era of high-stakes accountability and decreasing numbers of candidates able to meet the challenges of school leadership effectively, nurturing and supportive maintenance of principals becomes particularly relevant for rural communities (Capasso & Daresh, 2001).

In an effort to determine current challenges and practices in recruiting and retaining new administrators as well as the efforts showing positive results for recruiting and retaining principals in rural areas, the researchers surveyed rural Midwestern superintendents. Specifically, this study sought to identify rural school district superintendents’ perceptions of the major challenges to recruitment and retention of administrators as well as effective strategies to reduce administrative turnover.

**Methodology**

This study used survey research. Midwest superintendents were recruited to investigate administrative recruitment and retention strategies as well as the factors impacting the loss or retention of quality administrators. Researchers randomly selected 140 rural Midwestern school districts and obtained the superintendents’ e-mail addresses from their school websites. An email was sent to the superintendents inviting them to participate in the study. It detailed study information and provided a link to a self-administered online survey.

**Participants**

Of the 140 rural superintendents of school districts from Midwestern states randomly selected to participate in the study, a total of 40 superintendents completed the survey. Accordingly, there was an overall response rate of 29%. The Midwestern states included Missouri, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. A demographic data sheet gathered information through traditional questions pertaining to participants’ gender, race, education, career, and the current district in which they serve. All participants indicated whether their schools were located in a rural district not near an urban area, rural district near an urban area, or a small town community; the enrollment of the school districts ranged from 200 to 5600 students.

**Instrument**

Permission was obtained to adapt and use the survey instrument “Rural School Districts: Recruitment and Retention Practices” developed by for partnered research between The National Association of State Boards of Education and the Appalachia Educational Laboratory (Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeves, & Salgado, 2005). The survey instrument was adapted and utilized to gather information from participants regarding recruitment and retention strategies for administrative positions within rural school districts. Additional questions related to participants’ perceptions of the greatest urgency in their respective districts and invited predictions of superintendent turnover in their respective states. To assess participants’ perceptions of factors that contribute to recruiting and retaining administrators, the instrument included items rated on a six-point Likert scale (1= Not at all; 3= Sometimes; 6= A great deal). In addition, the instrument assessed the degree to which certain strategies are used in administrator recruitment and retention efforts, rated on a 3-point Likert scale (1= Never, 2= Sometimes, 3= Frequently).

Recruitment items focused on the extent to which certain factors serve as a challenge for recruiting administrators (e.g., low/competitive salaries, geographic and/or social isolation, social environment and culture, working conditions, and close proximity to higher paying districts), how recruits for administrator positions are found (e.g., job fairs, local ads, statewide ads, out-of-state/national ads, Internet ads, etc.), and the district’s reliance on particular methods for administrative recruitment (“grow-your-own,” competitive salaries, promoting benefits, etc.). Retention items focused on the extent to which certain factors serve as a challenge for retaining administrators (e.g., low/competitive salaries, geographic and/or social isolation, social environment and culture, working conditions, and geographic isolation).

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1 The Rural School Districts: The Recruitment & Retention Practices instrument is used to gather information about the recruitment and retention challenges and practices in rural school districts specifically regarding teaching positions. Because the purpose of the present study was to focus on administrative challenges of rural school districts, the language of the questions was adapted to reflect recruitment and retention challenges and practices for administrators in rural school districts.
conditions, and close proximity to higher paying districts) and the district’s reliance on particular methods for administrative retention (e.g., formal induction programs, mentoring programs, positive school culture, involving communities, etc.). Finally, participants were offered the option of providing written responses regarding effective recruitment and retention strategies, their beliefs regarding why some administrators leave a district, and their beliefs regarding why some administrators stay in a district.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics were calculated to gain an understanding of the overall sample of participants. One-way MANOVAs were conducted to examine differences between recruitment and retention challenges among school district community types (i.e., rural district near urban area, rural district not near urban area, and small town), as well as the strategies utilized. In the event that homogeneity of variance existed and the results of the follow-up ANOVAs were significant, Tukey’s HSD post-hoc tests were conducted to determine where differences exist.

Findings

Descriptive information from the 40 participating superintendents can be found in Table 1. Overall, the sample was primarily Caucasian (97.5%) and male (82.5%). Because sampling was done randomly and the personal demographics of all participants contacted was not known, it is unknown if the race and gender make-up of the present sample is representative of the overall sample that was contacted for participation. However, a demographic analysis of superintendents noted in The Study of the American School Superintendency, which surveyed 2,262 superintendents across the nation, revealed that 94.9% of individuals who hold the position of superintendent identified as Caucasian; 86.5% identified as male (Glass, Bjork, Brunner, & American Association of School Administrators, 2000). In the present study, reports also indicated that participants served primarily as a superintendent in a rural district not near an urban area (65%), but participants also worked in rural districts near an urban area (15%), or in small towns (20%). When asked to report on the greatest urgency in their respective districts, the most frequently cited response involved financial concerns (55%), followed by student achievement (25%), collaborative decision-making (5.0%), community support (5.0%), student enrollment (2.5%), adequate facilities (2.5%), quality instruction (2.5%), and a new state department (2.5%). Seventy percent of participants predicted the rate of superintendent turnover in their state would increase, whereas 30% predicted the turnover rate would remain the same. Interestingly, no one predicted a decrease in turnover.

Challenges to Recruitment

Table 2 illustrates the factors participants reported lead to difficulty recruiting administrators in their school districts. While none of the issues assessed were scored very high, geographic isolation had the overall highest reported score (M=3.33), indicating it was the most challenging factor for recruiting administrators as a whole. On the other hand, working conditions (e.g., administrative support) had the lowest score (M= 1.93), indicating it was the least challenging factor for recruiting administrators. However, when these factors were further looked at based on school district community types (i.e., rural district near urban area, rural district not near urban area, and small town) these results were not maintained. For example, while geographic isolation remained the most highly rated challenge in rural districts not near urban areas (M= 3.73) and in small towns (M= 2.88), close proximity to higher paying districts was rated as the most challenging factor in rural districts near urban areas (M= 4.00). Working condition, on the other hand, remained the lowest rated challenge to administration recruitment across school district community types. Within rural districts near urban areas; however, social isolation was equally rated as their least challenging recruitment factor.

When further comparing these factors among school district community types, statistically significant differences occurred in the reported challenges of recruiting administrators based on school district location, F (11, 64) = 2.224, p = .021, Wilk’s λ = 0.498, partial ε2 = .29. Post-hoc tests revealed rural districts not located near an urban area were more likely to report geographic isolation (p = .017) and social isolation (p = .012) as a challenge for recruiting administrators when compared to rural districts located near an urban area. However, rural districts near urban areas were significantly more likely to report close proximity to higher paying districts as a challenging factor for recruitment when compared to rural districts not near an urban area (p = .029) or districts located in small towns (p = .002). Recruitment challenges reported from school districts located in small towns and those located in rural districts not near urban areas were not statistically significant on any factor.
### Table 1

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>82.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (highest degree obtained)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Specialist</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37.5</td>
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<td><strong>School district community</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural, not near urban area</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural, near urban area</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small town</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career path to superintendency</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher, Assistant Principal, Principal &amp; Central Office</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and Central Office</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher and Principal</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total years of experience in education</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-3 years</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
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<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater than 15 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total years at current superintendency</strong></td>
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<td>0-3 years</td>
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<td>10.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
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<td>30.0</td>
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<td>10-15 years</td>
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<td>20.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater than 15 years</td>
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<td>15.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Years until plan to retire</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5</td>
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<td>3-5 years</td>
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<td>5-10 years</td>
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<td>25.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greater than 15 years</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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</table>
## Table 2
### Challenges to Administration Recruitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment challenges</th>
<th>Rural, not near urban (n=26)</th>
<th>Rural, near urban area (n=6)</th>
<th>Small town (n=8)</th>
<th>Overall (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/uncompetitive salaries</td>
<td>3.12 (.95)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.72)</td>
<td>2.13 (.99)</td>
<td>2.88 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic isolation</td>
<td>3.73 (1.08)</td>
<td>2.17 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.88 (1.46)</td>
<td>3.33 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>3.27 (1.22)</td>
<td>1.67 (.82)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social environment and culture</td>
<td>3.19 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.10)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.06)</td>
<td>2.90 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>2.08 (1.13)</td>
<td>1.67 (.82)</td>
<td>1.63 (.74)</td>
<td>1.93 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close proximity to higher paying districts</td>
<td>2.92 (.85)</td>
<td>4.00 (.90)</td>
<td>2.25 (1.04)</td>
<td>2.95 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert Scale range 1-6 (1= “Not at all”, 3= “Some”, 6= “A great deal”)

## Table 3
### Strategies used for locating administrative recruits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment strategies</th>
<th>Rural, not near urban (n=26)</th>
<th>Rural, near urban area (n=6)</th>
<th>Small town (n=8)</th>
<th>Overall (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job fairs</td>
<td>1.22 (.42)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.14 (.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local advertising</td>
<td>2.04 (.77)</td>
<td>1.83 (.98)</td>
<td>1.88 (.64)</td>
<td>1.97 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide advertising</td>
<td>2.80 (.50)</td>
<td>3.00 (.00)</td>
<td>2.38 (.74)</td>
<td>2.74 (.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-state advertising</td>
<td>1.57 (.79)</td>
<td>1.50 (.55)</td>
<td>1.25 (.71)</td>
<td>1.49 (.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website/Internet advertising</td>
<td>2.67 (.48)</td>
<td>2.67 (.82)</td>
<td>2.13 (.84)</td>
<td>2.55 (.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job banks</td>
<td>1.65 (.83)</td>
<td>1.67 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.63 (.92)</td>
<td>1.65 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal contacts/networking</td>
<td>2.48 (.51)</td>
<td>2.50 (.55)</td>
<td>2.38 (.52)</td>
<td>2.46 (.51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References from other districts</td>
<td>2.30 (.56)</td>
<td>2.17 (.75)</td>
<td>2.25 (.71)</td>
<td>2.27 (.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with colleges/universities</td>
<td>1.91 (.60)</td>
<td>1.83 (.75)</td>
<td>1.63 (.74)</td>
<td>1.84 (.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsolicited resumes/references</td>
<td>1.65 (.65)</td>
<td>1.67 (.82)</td>
<td>1.38 (.52)</td>
<td>1.59 (.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.33 (.58)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.41)</td>
<td>1.43 (.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert Scale range 1-3 (1= “Never”, 2= “Sometimes”, 3= “Frequently”)

Table 4 illustrates the extent to which participants reported they relied on various recruitment strategies in their school districts. The “Other” category of recruitment strategies allowed participants to enter responses. The one text response that clarified Other recruitment strategies was state-wide searches. Overall, the highest rated strategies identified were grow-your-own (e.g., helping teachers earn administrative certification) (M = 3.62), including building-level staff in recruitment and hiring processes (M =3.46), offering competitive salaries (M = 3.10), and promoting the advantages of administration and living in the area (M = 3.10), respectively. On the other hand, collecting state/local data on administrator supply and demand (M= 1.59) was the overall least relied upon strategy. When
these factors were further looked at based on school district community types (i.e., rural district near urban area, rural district not near urban area, and small town), the same four recruitment strategies previously noted were endorsed as the most used across school district communities. However, districts in small towns also endorsed promoting benefits (e.g., including insurance, daycare assistance, and/or tuition assistance) equal to their highest rated strategies. When assessing the lowest rated strategies across school district communities, collecting state/local data on supply and demand remained the least used strategy for both rural districts near urban areas (M= 1.00) and small towns (M= 1.00). Offering housing/relocation assistance was the lowest rated strategy for rural districts near urban areas (M= 1.72). Finally, when comparing these strategies among the school district community types, no statistically significant differences occurred based on school district location.

Table 4
Use of Recruitment Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment strategies</th>
<th>Rural, not near urban (n=26)</th>
<th>Rural, near urban area (n=6)</th>
<th>Small town (n=8)</th>
<th>Overall (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Grow-your-own” initiatives</td>
<td>3.64 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.67 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.50 (1.41)</td>
<td>3.62 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive salaries</td>
<td>3.00 (96)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.10)</td>
<td>3.50 (1.07)</td>
<td>3.10 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting benefits</td>
<td>2.88 (1.05)</td>
<td>2.67 (1.37)</td>
<td>3.50 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.97 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering housing/relocation assistance</td>
<td>1.72 (.98)</td>
<td>1.67 (1.21)</td>
<td>1.75 (1.39)</td>
<td>1.72 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collecting state/local data on supply and demand</td>
<td>1.92 (.95)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.59 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using data analysis to guide recruitment</td>
<td>2.04 (.89)</td>
<td>1.50 (.84)</td>
<td>1.50 (.76)</td>
<td>1.85 (.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including partners in recruitment efforts</td>
<td>2.36 (1.04)</td>
<td>1.50 (.84)</td>
<td>2.13 (1.46)</td>
<td>2.18 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular evaluation of recruitment initiatives</td>
<td>2.04 (.84)</td>
<td>1.50 (.84)</td>
<td>1.75 (.89)</td>
<td>1.90 (.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with colleges/universities</td>
<td>2.88 (1.05)</td>
<td>2.17 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.00 (.54)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Including building-level staff in recruitment/hiring processes</td>
<td>3.68 (.85)</td>
<td>3.33 (1.63)</td>
<td>2.88 (1.46)</td>
<td>3.46 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting the advantages of superintendency and living in the area</td>
<td>3.32 (.95)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.17)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.60)</td>
<td>3.10 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.00 (2.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>1.50 (.71)</td>
<td>2.17 (1.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert Scale range 1-6 (1= “Not at all”, 3= “Some”, 6= “A great deal”)

The open-ended questions supported the Likert scale findings. Twelve of the 40 respondents indicated they believe “grow your own” strategy is the most effective for their district. Participant responses that support this strategy included:

- Investing in current staff that shows potential;
- The board prefers local people who start as teachers in the districts;
- Hire good teachers that you can convert to administrators, and
- Promoting within district/grow your own. However, unlike the quantitative results, salary was mentioned 10 times, with seven of these statements suggesting competitive salaries as being an effective strategy for recruitment. Less commonly mentioned strategies included the need to promote the area (n=3) and the need to include staff in recruitment efforts (n=1).

Challenges to Retention

Table 5 illustrates the factors participants reported led to difficulty retaining administrators in their school districts. Similar to the challenges reported for recruiting administrators, geographic isolation had the overall highest reported score (M= 3.03), indicating it was the most challenging factor for retaining administrators. Also, similar to recruitment challenges, working conditions had the lowest reported score (M= 2.97), indicating it was the overall least challenging retention factor. However, when these factors were further looked at based on school district community types (i.e., rural district near urban area, rural district not near urban area, and small town) differences occurred. Also similar to recruitment challenges, while geographic isolation remained the most highly rated challenge in rural districts not near urban areas (M= 3.42) and in small towns (M= 2.71), close proximity to higher paying districts was rated as the most challenging factor in rural districts near urban areas (M= 4.00). Geographic isolation was reported as the least challenging factor toward administration retention for rural districts near urban areas (M= 1.67). Working conditions, on the other hand, remained the lowest
rated factor for retaining administrators in both rural districts not near urban areas (M= 2.46) and in small towns (M= 1.57).

When further comparing these factors among school district community types, statistically significant differences occurred in the reported challenges of retaining administrators based on school district location, $F (11, 64) = 2.33, p = .016$; Wilk's $\lambda = 0.475$, partial $\eta^2 = .311$. Post-hoc tests revealed rural districts not located near an urban area were significantly more likely to report geographic isolation ($p = .007$) and social isolation ($p = .021$) as a challenge to retaining administrators compared to rural districts located near an urban area. Small towns were also significantly more likely to report social isolation ($p = .031$) as a retention challenge compared to rural districts located near an urban area. Retention challenges reported from school districts located in small towns and those located in rural districts not near urban areas were not statistically significant on any factor.

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges to Administration Retention</th>
<th>Rural, not near urban (n=26)</th>
<th>Rural, near urban area (n=6)</th>
<th>Small town (n=8)</th>
<th>Overall (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low/uncompetitive salaries</td>
<td>3.19 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.50 (1.76)</td>
<td>2.29 (1.25)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic isolation</td>
<td>3.42 (1.21)</td>
<td>1.67 (.82)</td>
<td>2.71 (1.38)</td>
<td>3.03 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social isolation</td>
<td>3.31 (1.23)</td>
<td>1.83 (.99)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.85 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social environment and culture</td>
<td>3.15 (1.19)</td>
<td>2.67 (1.51)</td>
<td>2.29 (1.25)</td>
<td>2.92 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>2.46 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.03)</td>
<td>1.57 (.98)</td>
<td>2.28 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close proximity to higher paying districts</td>
<td>2.85 (1.01)</td>
<td>4.00 (.89)</td>
<td>2.57 (1.51)</td>
<td>2.97 (1.16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert Scale range 1-6 (1= “Not at all”, 3= “Some”, 6= “A great deal”)

Upon review of the open-ended questions, of the 28 responses regarding challenges to retaining administrators, isolation both geographically and socially was cited 11 times. Examples of responses included:

- *Not from a rural background;*
- *Personal attributes don’t align with community values;*
- *Location remote, and*
- *Do not relate to the community.*

Salary was seen as equally challenging to retention based on its frequency in responses (n=11). Most responses about salary being a challenge to retention centered on administrators leaving for higher pay.

**Retention Strategies**

Table 6 illustrates the extent to which participants reported they relied on various strategies for retaining administrators in their school districts. Overall, the highest rated strategies identified were creating a positive school culture (M= 4.11), investing in professional development opportunities (M= 3.92), and using technology for mentoring and professional development (M= 3.61). On the other hand, offering an incentive for staying past the first year was rated the overall lowest (M= 1.78) in addition to “Other” (M= 1.67). No written responses were provided by participants to clarify what “Other” retention strategies may be. Nevertheless, because “Other” was rated with the lowest overall score, it appears whatever these strategies might be they are not used to a large extent. When these factors were further looked at based on school district community types (i.e., rural district near urban area, rural district not near urban area, and small town) some differences occurred. While the same highly rated recruitment strategies noted above were primarily endorsed across school district communities, districts in small towns endorsed offering increased salaries/raises at a slightly higher rate than using technology for mentoring and professional development. Thus, in small towns, technology for mentoring and professional development was not in the top three retention strategies, but was the fourth. When further assessing the lowest rated strategies across school district communities, offering incentives for staying past the first year remained the least used strategy for all school district communities (when not considering the option of selecting “Other”). Furthermore, when comparing these retention strategies among school district community types no statistically significant differences occurred based on school district location.
was the most cited reason for administrators leaving, Interestingly, respondents appeared to be geographic isolation. The number one reason cited among Midwestern administrators in rural communities was also frequently cited (n=9), it was the most prominent response; however, concerned personal ties to the area. Sixteen participants cited location and family ties as important to staying within a rural district. Comments included statements such as, “fit in and like living in rural Iowa,” “grew up and lived in the district all their lives,” “sense of belonging in school and community” and “nice fit with the community.” While salary was also frequently cited (n=9), it appeared the ideas of “growing-your-own” and “having administrators feel like they belong” are perceived as the most important aspects of retaining administrators in rural communities.

Table 6
Use of Retention Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retention strategies</th>
<th>Rural, not near urban area (n=20)</th>
<th>Rural, near urban area (n=6)</th>
<th>Small town (n=8)</th>
<th>Overall (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>2.52 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.33 (.82)</td>
<td>2.43 (1.13)</td>
<td>2.47 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal induction programs</td>
<td>2.96 (1.27)</td>
<td>2.83 (1.72)</td>
<td>3.00 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.95 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal mentoring programs</td>
<td>2.76 (1.20)</td>
<td>2.17 (1.33)</td>
<td>2.71 (1.25)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other support for administration</td>
<td>4.12 (.73)</td>
<td>4.17 (.75)</td>
<td>4.00 (.82)</td>
<td>4.11 (.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a positive school culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use technology for mentoring and professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving communities to welcome/support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investing in professional development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering incentives for staying past first year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering increased salaries/raises</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering improved benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering tuition/other assistance in obtaining additional degrees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular evaluation process regarding retention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other support for administration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Likert Scale range 1-6 (1= “Not at all”, 3= “Some”, 6= “A great deal”)

The written responses supported the quantitative findings with regard to retention strategies. That is, comments regarding climate/culture were mentioned in 12 of the 28 provided responses. All of these comments centered on “positive work environment,” “creating a positive school culture,” or “positive school climate.” The most prominent response; however, concerned personal ties to the area. Sixteen participants cited location and family ties as important to staying within a rural district. Comments included statements such as, “fit in and like living in rural Iowa,” “grew up and lived in the district all their lives,” “sense of belonging in school and community” and “nice fit with the community.” While salary was also frequently cited (n=9), it appears the ideas of “growing-your-own” and “having administrators feel like they belong” are perceived as the most important aspects of retaining administrators in rural communities.

Discussion

It is no surprise rural schools encounter difficulties recruiting administrative candidates. Salary limitation, geographic isolation, and distance from professional growth are some reasons noted for lack of recruitment to rural areas (Townsell, 2007). While this study identified the same types of issues, the number one reason cited among Midwestern respondents appeared to be geographic isolation. Interestingly, location appeared to cut both ways. It was the most cited reason for administrators leaving, and yet it was the most cited reason for administrators staying. The caveat appeared to be whether the administrator had a tie to rural areas and if the district had provided incentives to become an administrator through a “grow your own” type program. As noted earlier, the subject of isolation appears to have a larger impact on small town districts (social isolation) and districts not near urban areas because of the social isolation principals experience as noted by Townsell (2007).

As expected, salary does play into administrators’ decisions about whether to remain in a district or leave a district, but again, it was equally cited both on the side of being retained and on the side of leaving a district. Low salaries, social environment, social isolation, and proximity to districts with higher pay were all problematic for rural districts; however, the proximity of the district to urban districts influenced the degree to which these issues appeared to be a challenge for recruiting and retaining administrators. Districts near urban areas were more likely to report issues with salary because they, likely, are located in close proximity to larger districts that pay more. Thus, they are often forced to compete and find themselves losing administrators to higher paying, nearby districts. The issue of salary was reported as both a recruitment and retention strategy for many rural schools. However, it appears it is especially important for the rural districts near urban areas to pay attention to the financial packages offered to administrators in the nearby urban districts when considering recruitment.
and retention strategies, as was also noted by Beeson and Strange (2000). While financial issues are a real problem for most rural districts, districts distant from urban areas may not find salary/comensation packages to be as prominent an issue as rural districts located near urban areas with more competitive packages. This supports Chalker’s (1999) statement concerning rural schools’ unique contextual characteristics and how they require unique leadership. Indeed, it appears even the geographic placement of the rural community can have real effects on a district’s challenges to recruitment and retention. Therefore, leaders within these districts must develop strategies that reflect their districts’ unique challenges.

An area not identified as a challenge was working conditions. Hence, districts might consider exploiting this in recruitment for rural schools. The issue, and it scored (M=1.93) out of 6 possible, indicating the working conditions are considered by most as a positive influence. While it was cited most often among the open-ended responses for retention strategies, it appears to be a reason administrators stay because they believe they belong and are supported. Considering this aspect, it is perhaps a point to be emphasized when农村 districts are recruiting.

Apparently, the most common methods used to recruit administrators in the Midwest appear to be the “growing your own” approach. Hammer and colleagues (2005) found “grow your own” initiatives nurture local talent through collaborations among public school systems and postsecondary institutions. This method was the number one method for recruitment according to the open-ended responses. While responses indicated state-wide advertising, networking, websites, and references were used for recruiting administrators to the district, the fit between those who have a commitment to the area appears to be the most beneficial to both the district and the administrator.

What did appear to work as an important retention strategy for rural schools was emphasis on a positive school culture and climate, investment in professional development, use of technology for mentoring, along with increased benefits. These strategies align with the findings by Hammer et al. (2005). Superintendents cited as promising practices: 1) grow-your-own initiatives, 2) targeted incentives, 3) improve recruitment and hiring practices using state and local data, 4) improve school-level support, and 5) use interactive technologies.

As rural districts move forward, programs for “grow your own” need to include practice for possible future principals in authentic settings where they can observe leadership in action as well as engage in collaborative leadership with stakeholder groups. As districts plan for future leadership needs, it will take concerted efforts in mentoring to help high functioning teachers move into administrative positions and become effective instructional leaders (Browne-Ferrigno, 2007), and it will require the superintendent having vision for implementing change initiatives to transform principals from managers to instructional leader through quality professional learning (Browne-Ferrigno, 2006).

Limitation and Future Directions for Research

A limitation of the current study was the lack of diversity in participants. Specifically, the study respondents primarily identified as Caucasian males. While this sample is fairly representative of superintendents within the region in which the present study was conducted, as well as nationally, it would be helpful for future research to attempt to gain access to the perspectives of a more diverse sample of superintendents.

A second limitation was the sample was limited in terms of the location of the districts. The majority (65.0%) of participants reported they currently serve as the superintendent of a rural district not near an urban area. Therefore, future research should seek to specifically target a more balanced selection of rural locations.

References


center/school-leadership/state-policy/Documents/Is-There-Truly-a-Shortage-of-School-Principals.pdf


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The Benefits and Challenges of Special Education Positions in Rural Settings: 
Listening to the Teachers

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Plymouth State University

Maggie Gravelle  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Special education teachers, through a national survey conducted in 55 rural districts, provided information on the positive and negative aspects of teaching in rural schools. The 203 special educators were asked what they liked best about their position and what they found challenging. Some of the themes identified in the analysis centered on positive features of working in rural areas. Characteristics of the rural community fostered family-like relationships with others in their school and in-depth relationships with parents and students. Half of the teachers also reported they shared the responsibility or took a team approach to delivering special education services, a factor related to teacher satisfaction. The majority of teachers were satisfied with the instructional aspects of their position but dissatisfied with non-instructional role responsibilities. Challenges of the position also included role confusion and a lack of resources. Related implications for rural administrators interested in the satisfaction of special education teachers are provided.

Key Words: Rural education, special education teacher satisfaction, rural challenges, rural advantage

Research in the field of special education has highlighted several work-related challenges (e.g., role confusion, role conflict, paperwork, inadequate support), which can adversely affect special educators’ sense of satisfaction with their positions (Billingsley, 2004a). In addition, there are characteristics of the position inherent to working in rural settings (e.g., geographic isolation, professional isolation, diversity of caseloads), which may contribute to the difficulty some administrators experience recruiting and retaining special educators to positions in rural districts (Provasnik et al., 2007; Schwartzbeck, Prince, Redfield, Morris, & Hammer, 2003). In fact, the shortage of highly qualified special educators in rural areas is reported to be as high as 35% (Brownell, Bishop, & Sindelar, 2005). Despite these challenges, research has also highlighted work-related benefits to teaching in rural settings (e.g., smaller class size, greater parent involvement), which may contribute to teacher satisfaction (Provasnik et al.). Teacher satisfaction is important not only because it is related to teacher attrition and poses a threat to the continuity of education services but also because teacher satisfaction can have an impact on the quality of the education students with disabilities receive (Brownell, Sindelar, Kieley, & Danielson, 2010; Whitaker, 2000). As teacher satisfaction also plays a significant role in the overall climate of the school, factors that influence teacher satisfaction become critical information when seeking to create positive school environments (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).

This study seeks to identify features of the special education position related to teacher satisfaction. To this end, it examines the perceptions of special education teachers in rural areas related to: (a) what they like best about teaching in rural schools; (b) the challenges and reasons for dissatisfaction with their position; and (c) information on support variables, specifically, a shared responsibility for delivering services to students on their caseload. The aim is to provide an understanding of the unique benefits and challenges of special education positions in rural areas. It is hoped that such information may be helpful to rural administrators by highlighting factors related to teacher satisfaction and thus strengthen their ability to foster positive working conditions in their schools. The literature review that frames the study outlines many positive and negative aspects of teaching in rural areas.
Positive Aspects of Teaching in Rural Schools

Rural school communities have many positive qualities that can influence the satisfaction of special education teachers. Rural teachers, for example, often report positive relationships with their students and parents, as well as an appreciation of the rural lifestyle (Davis, 2002). Provasnik and her colleagues (2007), using data provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), found that compared to teachers working in urban locales, a larger percentage of teachers working in rural areas, were satisfied with their class size, their students’ behavior, and the support they received from parents. Students in rural districts more frequently came to school prepared to learn and had fewer student behavior problems. Parents were more frequently involved in parent and teacher conferences and school events.

Research in rural education has highlighted additional qualities found in small, rural schools that positively impact teacher satisfaction. Malloy and Allen (2007) studied one rural elementary school with a low teacher attrition rate (6% versus 20% in the district and 19% in the state). The staff fostered a family-like atmosphere (e.g., making personal phone calls to each other in times of stress). The school emphasized collaboration among staff (e.g., team teaching, mentoring, peer coaching and evaluation) and administrators were reported as being caring and approachable. The non-threatening environment encouraged questions from new faculty and promoted opportunities for teachers to discuss issues with experienced colleagues. Similarly, in one rural district in Florida, teachers stated the sense of knowing each other well was the quality of working in a small school community they enjoyed most (Huysman, 2008). The presence of a cohesive school community was important for these teachers working in their small, rural school.

Nagle, Hernandez, Embler, McLaughlin, and Doh (2006), investigating 13 high schools with high levels of staff stability in three rural states, found that an attitude of collective responsibility within the school was also important to teacher satisfaction. Students with disabilities were often educated in the general education classroom and the staff shared the responsibility for educating all students, both special education and general education students. Teachers of general and special education described close relationships with each other and a high degree of collaboration. This was facilitated by a shared planning time for teachers and team meetings once a week. Building administrators were also very involved with special education processes and supported a positive working relationship between teachers.

Challenges of Teaching in Rural Areas

The remote locations and geographically large districts of some rural areas pose distinct challenges for special educators. In rural special education, the low incidence of special needs populations can mean smaller caseloads, but can also mean teachers are one of few special educators in their school or district, or even the only special educator providing services in several schools. Special educators in remote locations frequently report professional and social isolation as a challenge of their position (Collins, 1999). Additionally, the transition to a rural area, where the social and cultural activities typically associated with larger urban districts are not available, can be difficult for new teachers (Bornfield, Hall, Hall, & Hoover, 1997).

The characteristics of the special needs population create additional challenges for rural special educators. In some small rural school districts, special education teachers provide instruction to students in kindergarten through 12th grade across a variety of subjects (Schwartzbeck et al., 2003). Special educators are often asked to address a wide variety of student needs and disability categories in rural schools, resulting in a need for teachers to work outside of their typical training and expertise (Brownell et al., 2005).

Many rural schools operate within a more restricted budget because of a lower tax base in these areas (Monk, 2008). Limited operating budgets in rural schools present additional challenges for rural special education teachers. Teachers may need to make do with fewer materials and resources due to budget constraints. Rural schools may struggle to provide the specialized services required by individualized programs. As a result, small schools may be forced to consolidate services or hire outside agencies to provide services for their students with special needs (Hodge, & Krumm, 2009).
Historically, teachers in rural areas have experienced lower pay scales, fewer support networks, and limited professional development opportunities because of their schools’ limited resources (Collins, 1999; Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005).

Further, the federal mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) for student progress can be discouraging for special educators in rural areas. Despite the teachers’ effectiveness, a small number of special needs students can create artificial volatility in achievement scores, hindering the school’s ability to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). Being marked as an In Need of Improvement school can create a demoralizing environment for special educators. NCLB sanctions (e.g., fewer federal funds, reassignment of money, or the option of school choice) can strain an already stretched school budget as administrators struggle to recruit and compete with the better salaries, student services, and teacher programs found in other parts of the state (Brownell et al., 2005; Jimerson, 2005).

It appears that special education teachers who work in small and rural communities may have fewer professional sources of support available to them thus increasing their sense of professional isolation. In a recent national study, researchers examined the relationship of work-related support to special education teacher satisfaction in rural districts (Berry, 2012). One key support variable, the support provided by other special educators, was not always available. However, teachers who were resourceful had a wider network of support from available sources such as administrators and general education colleagues; these teachers reported greater levels of satisfaction. Job satisfaction was also found to increase if others in the school understood the special educator’s role and responsibilities and if others shared in the responsibility of providing services to students with disabilities.

In summary, research has indicated that small, rural school environments have positive qualities and apparent challenges that can influence special education teachers’ satisfaction with their position. However, only a small number of studies investigating factors related to teacher satisfaction specifically focus on the rural special education teacher. Studies that have investigated rural teachers were generally conducted in a centralized region or single state. Research conducted on a national scale that analyzed rural special education teachers’ perceptions of their positions would provide vital information related to teacher satisfaction.

This study was guided by the following research questions: What do special education teachers report they like best about their current position in rural schools? What do they perceive as the challenges of working in rural schools? What do teachers cite as reasons for dissatisfaction with instructional or non-instructional aspects of their job? Do special education teachers state they shoulder the entire responsibility of educating students with disabilities on their caseload or do they share this responsibility? What are the contributors to this perception?

**Method**

During the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, special educators from a national sample of rural school districts provided data for this study. Data reported here were collected from responses to open-ended questions related to special education teachers’ perceptions of satisfaction and support in their positions. These questions were part of a larger survey with quantitative items that have been reported separately (Berry, 2012). The following sections outline procedures for sample selection, teacher characteristics, survey administration, and data analysis.

**Sample Selection**

Participants were special education teachers from rural school districts in 33 states. Rural districts were identified in the following way: first regular public school districts were identified from the NCES Common Core of Data (Version 1a: NCES, 2006). Districts were then identified as rural in several ways: (a) their eligibility in either the Rural Education Achievement Program or the Rural and Low-Income Schools Program; (b) they were designated with a rural NCES metro-centric code (i.e., 7 or 8); or (c) had a rural NCES urban-centric code (i.e., 41 for rural fringe, 42 for rural distant, or 43 for rural remote).

Fifty-five districts were then randomly selected from these rural districts. Sixteen of the districts were in rural fringe locale codes and located near an urban cluster, 23 were categorized as rural distant...
(i.e., 5 to 25 miles from an urban area) and 16 were in rural remote areas (i.e., more than 25 miles from an urban center). Additional characteristics of the districts are outlined in Table 1.

Researchers utilized district websites and administrators to identify all special education teachers in each district. A letter of introduction was sent to each special education teacher explaining the aims of the study. Teachers were then contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the research. A cap of 10 teachers per district was imposed to avoid over-representation of the sample by larger districts.

From a pool of 522 special education teachers in the 55 districts, 159 were found ineligible either because they were not special educators (e.g., worked as a paraprofessional or school psychologist) or the cap of teachers had been reached for the district. Interviewers were able to contact 243 teachers by telephone, resulting in a response rate of 67% (i.e., 243/363). A total of 204 teachers agreed to participate in the study for a participation rate of 84% (i.e., 204/243; Berry, 2012).

Table 1
Composition of District Sample (N = 55)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number of districts in category (%)</th>
<th>Average student population (range)</th>
<th>Average number of schools (range)</th>
<th>Number of districts in NCES local code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Rural School Achievement Program</td>
<td>20 (36%)</td>
<td>373 (72 – 1,020)</td>
<td>2.3 (1 – 6)</td>
<td>Remote 10 Distant 3 Fringe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural and Low-Income Schools Program</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>2,719 (632 – 7137)</td>
<td>7 (3 - 14)</td>
<td>Remote 2 Distant 7 Fringe 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCES Rural</td>
<td>24 (44%)</td>
<td>2,229 (131- 11,047)</td>
<td>4.8 (2 - 17)</td>
<td>Remote 7 Distant 6 Fringe 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher and Position Characteristics**

As can be seen in Tables 2 and 3, special education teachers in this sample were typical of those found in other rural research (Bornfield et al., 1997; Davis, 1992). The majority of teachers (62%) had lived in their rural area for 16 years or more, and nearly half were teaching in a school located in the same general area as the place where they grew up. Teachers held certifications and taught in more than one grade level. Most (80%) had small caseloads (i.e., fewer than 20 students) with an average of 15 students. Teachers in the sample had a wide range of experience. Most teachers (62%) held their state’s highest level of certification in special education and were considered highly qualified. Half of the teachers had been teaching in the field of special education for more than 10 years, and 33% more than 16 years (Berry, 2012). One rural teacher had been working in the field of special education for 32 years. In some districts the special education teacher was the only special educator in the district and divided his/her time between two or three buildings, whereas in other districts the special educator was one of many special education teachers in a large consolidated district.
Table 2
**Teacher Demographics (N = 203)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>New 1-2 yrs</th>
<th>Beginning 3-5 yrs</th>
<th>Early 6-10 yrs</th>
<th>Mature 11-15 yrs</th>
<th>Veteran 16-20+ yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Years in position</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8 (.8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in special education</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.9 (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years living in rural area</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.2 (15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>20 – 29</td>
<td>30 – 39</td>
<td>40 – 49</td>
<td>50 - 59</td>
<td>&gt; 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 (11)</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: BA/BS Bachelor degree; MS/MEd Master degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
**Position Characteristics (N = 203)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% teachers with special education certification</th>
<th>K – 5</th>
<th>6-8</th>
<th>9-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary instructional setting</td>
<td>Self-contained</td>
<td>Resource Room</td>
<td>Inclusion classroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students on caseload</td>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>16-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean 15.2 (SD 8)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade level</td>
<td>K – 5</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>9 – 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of SpEd certification for their state</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
<td>BA/BS</td>
<td>MS/MEd</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher licensure</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Alternative</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grew up in rural area</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: BA/BS Bachelor degree; MS/MEd Master degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures

Seven interviewers conducted phone interviews of 35 to 90 minutes in length with the teachers. Interviewers were two researchers from the National Center on Rural Education Support (NCRES) who had extensive training and experience in survey implementation, and five university graduate assistants. Interviewers were trained prior to the start of the study and three periodic checks for drift with these procedures were conducted over the nine months of the study. Reliability rates for adherence to the script and accuracy of response recording was 95% or higher (Berry, 2012). During the interview, a script was read and teacher responses were typed directly into a computer database. Additionally, interviewers were trained to verify that the recorded answer accurately represented the teacher’s views by reading the recorded response aloud (i.e., member checking) following the teacher’s response to each item. If teachers provided additional information to expand or clarify their responses, the interviewer would type that information into the database.

Data Analysis

Coding for the teacher responses was developed in a structured and logical way. Data were compiled by question in a table containing each teacher’s response. One researcher from NCRES and one doctoral student coded data into topic areas generated from prior research in rural special education investigating special education teacher job satisfaction (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007; Malloy & Allen, 2007; Nagle et al., 2006). Categories emerged from the teacher responses (e.g., small school size, relationship with staff, relationship with students, paperwork), as researchers accounted for new relationships. Data were then re-categorized as connections both within and across items developed and new constructs emerged (e.g., shared responsibility with general educators, related service providers). This across-case analysis method was used to identify pervasive patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The code number(s) for each category were recorded beside each teacher’s response.

To assure that open-ended responses were coded with reliability, the two coders independently coded all responses from a subset of randomly selected districts. The coded responses for these districts were compared and inter-coder reliability (i.e., number of agreements divided by the total number of agreements plus disagreements) was 93% percent. Differences in coding were discussed and a consensus was reached. The remaining districts were then coded independently. Subsequent reliability checks ranged from 90 to 97% agreement with an average of 94.5%. Descriptive statistics were compiled based on the frequency and variety of teacher responses to address the research questions under investigation.

Findings

Special educators in 55 rural districts conveyed to researchers what they liked best and what they found challenging about teaching in special education. Additionally, teachers reported on factors related to their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their positions.

What Teachers Liked Best

Teachers talked about many aspects of their school and community when asked what they liked best about being a special educator in a small and rural school. Some of the major themes identified were positive characteristics generally associated with being a special education teacher whereas others were characteristics of being a teacher in a rural school.

Teaching in special education. Some of the teachers (14%) talked about positive aspects of working in the field of special education. For example, one teacher remarked, I like working in small groups and learning each of my kids learning styles in order to make the curriculum fit with their own unique ways. These teachers enjoyed watching their students make progress from year to year. I enjoy working with this population of students, explained one teacher. “I feel I can really make a difference and improve their lives, whatever their disabilities.
Teaching in a rural school. The majority of the teachers (86%), however, when asked about what they liked best about their special education position, discussed aspects of the position related to teaching in a rural school. Teachers indicated that the smaller size of their rural community made possible positive relationships with others in their school community, with their students’ parents, and with their students.

Almost one third (31%) of the special education teachers conveyed a family-like, supportive community in their school. The staff is a very big support to each other through personal and professional crisis, said one teacher of students with severe disabilities. Everyone works together like a team for a common goal. There is a lot of helping each other out in our school. Another teacher agreed: I like the feeling of being connected to everyone because it is small enough. You see everybody and have to work with everybody.

The special education teachers talked about forming close bonds with staff and these relationships provided a sense of professional support, which teachers appreciated. One teacher’s remark represents this group.

I like the feeling of being connected to everyone because it is small enough. You see everybody and have to work with everybody.

A climate of acceptance was reported, which had a positive effect on student interactions. For example, one elementary teacher remarked:

The acceptance of my students by everyone in the school [is what I like best]. I love the feeling that your school is like a small family or small community, and everyone is supportive and accepting of the kids with disabilities specifically. I go out to recess and I can’t tell which kids are mine. I taught in a larger school near [name of large city] and it wasn’t like that at all... It is a really good experience here.

The small size of the school also lent itself to an in-depth, personal knowledge of the students and their families. Twenty-eight percent of teacher comments communicated the opportunity in a rural school to watch students grow up from year to year, and see them in a variety of academic and non-academic contexts. You get to know the kids and the families really well in a small town, remarked one teacher in this group. That is really nice. I think being in a city school this would be more difficult. Another teacher had similar comments.

I develop a good strong relationship [with students], as I have them for 2 to 3 years and get a chance to be part of their lives. I am a surrogate mother and a friend. I also get to know the parents really well. This year they have been supportive. In the larger district I didn’t have this type of rapport with parents. Here, they stop by or you see in the hallway. We talk in the parking lot at the store. It’s neat.

One teacher briefly summarized the family atmosphere that can be part of a rural school: I know the entire school, every face, every name. These positive aspects of working in a small and rural school also translated to sustaining teachers in their positions. One fourth grade resource room teacher commented:

I think the reason I have been a special education teacher for 26 years is because of the emotional support and friendships that are here in this school. Probably the reason I have been here this long is because of the friendships with the other teachers that extend beyond my professional relationships at school.

Some teacher comments (16%) discussed positive aspects of working in a rural area. The kids are more considerate and anxious to learn here. They are hardworking and there is not a lot of competition among them about clothing or social status. [There are] less behavioral concerns than you would probably see in a city school. Half of the special education teachers had been raised in their rural area and so personal ties contributed to school pride and a sense of community. As stated by one teacher, I graduated from this school. It is home.

Challenges to the Position

When special educators were asked specifically about the challenges they encountered being a special education teacher in a rural school, several major themes emerged from the data. Teachers raised issues widely acknowledged by special educators in
general (e.g., parents, role responsibilities, paperwork, testing, the lack of time) and some issues specific to a rural context.

**Teaching in special education.** One of the most frequently mentioned challenges (21%) involved students’ parents. *Parents are one of my biggest challenges,* said one teacher of students with behavior disorders. She continued:

*You can help them with the 6 hours that you have them, but you can’t do much about the 18 hours that you don’t have them. So much of what these kids come to school with is dependent on what happens at home.*

Seventeen percent of special education teachers’ comments concerned the responsibilities of their job. As one elementary resource room teacher noted.

*Scheduling [is a challenge] - getting to see all the kids in the time you need to see them so you are not pulling kids from the things they need to be there for in the regular classroom. It’s a nightmare.*

The teachers expressed frustration with the lack of support provided by general education teachers. *Support from the general education teachers is limited,* one teacher said. *Some teachers don’t feel my kids should be in their classroom if they are not able to do everything the regular education students do.* Some of the frustration was related to poorly defined roles and responsibilities in the general education classroom. Typical comments were, *Co-teaching it is not easy. Educational views and the ways that you teach can clash.*

A few (8%) of special educators commented on federally imposed responsibilities: paperwork, state assessments, and meeting required benchmarks. One resource teacher said:

*Meeting the fantasy of NCLB [is the biggest challenge]. We just took our statewide assessment, and we were listed as a failing school because of my students. A six-month gain is a big deal in my experience, but because they didn’t make 3 years growth, I didn’t do my job. It is discouraging.*

Fifteen percent of teachers’ comments referenced the lack of time or the lack of staff to adequately perform the duties of the special education position and meet students’ needs. *The lack of help and time [are challenges]. If the caseloads were smaller, and you had more time to go into classrooms and work with students more, that would be helpful.*

**Teaching in a rural school.** Some of the challenges mentioned were specifically connected to teaching in a small and rural school (26%). The small size of the community contributed to the difficulty special education teachers had separating personal and professional lives. *It’s a small town and rumors spread,* commented one teacher, *so those lines get blurred professionally and confidentiality is a little harder.* Teachers discussed the professional isolation created by teaching in a rural district with large distances to travel to get to trainings. Teachers voiced concerns about inadequate school resources: services, programs, staff, combined classrooms, and larger caseloads. As one resource room teacher commented, *Because you are stretched for time you can’t be there the way you want to. I am the only special educator in the building.* Another teacher of a self-contained classroom explained:

*The diversity in the classroom [is a challenge]. I have LD, BD, MR, and autistic with one assistant. It is very difficult as it is hard to deal with all those classifications and personalities in one classroom. You don’t have the options that might be available in a larger district. You’ve got to take care of it yourself.*

A small percent (2%) of special educators raised concerns about low salaries.

Even though the smaller size of the school meant limited budgets, teachers also commented on providing services to students, despite limited financial resources. A fifth grade teacher’s remark was representative:

*Our special education coordinator is very helpful… For example we have a student who has a hearing impairment and we are getting an amplifying system for that student. Some people might think that type of thing might not happen in a small school like we have. It might take a while, but whatever a student might need, we try real hard to provide that.*

**Satisfaction**

Special education teachers’ responses about satisfaction spanned instructional and non-instructional areas of their position.
Satisfaction with instructional aspects. Most of the special education teachers (89%) indicated that they were either satisfied or strongly satisfied with the instructional aspects of teaching and delivering services to students on their caseload. Within the group who were dissatisfied, teachers provided several reasons for dissatisfaction, including workload demands (4%) and not enough time to meet the demands of the role (2%). For example, one middle school teacher stated, *I feel the kids need more time to work on their skills. I just don't get enough time with them.*

Satisfaction with non-instructional aspects. A large majority (67%) of the special education teachers indicated they were dissatisfied with the non-instructional aspects of teaching. Many teachers (43%) specifically mentioned the paperwork involved with the job. *Paperwork!* said one teacher, whose comments represented the overall sentiment. *There is more and more and it accomplishes less and less. It takes away from the time with the kids.* Seventeen percent of the teachers who expressed dissatisfaction commented on the time demands of the special education job (i.e., record keeping, writing reports, etc.). These responsibilities demanded so much time that they had to be accomplished on personal time. A few (2%) teachers mentioned the lack of support from others in the school.

Shared Responsibility

Researchers also examined whether special education teachers believed they shouldered the entire responsibility for providing services to students on their caseload or shared that responsibility. Half of the teachers (51%) said that they had sole responsibility for students with disabilities. One special educator who worked with students with more severe disabilities made statements reflecting the sentiments of these teachers. *It is all me,* she said. *If I don't speak for them it isn’t going to happen. I need to advocate for my students constantly.*

Special educators provided a variety of reasons for perceiving that they shouldered the entire responsibility of educating their students. Thirty-four percent of the teachers conveyed a lack of support from others in their school. A few of these teachers cited state testing and school sanctions as adding to their sense of professional isolation. As one teacher remarked,

*If some students are not passing classes... then the pressure is on me to get...the grades up. The other special educators also put pressure on me. This should be more of a team effort. There is a lot of accountability going on with being a Need of Improvement School and it [the responsibility] all falls to me.*

Other teachers in this group talked about role confusion, for example, general education teachers who did not fully understand their role. One comment was: *We are still in transition to co-teaching and ultimately we are training the general educators to think differently. But the general educators refer to the students as ‘your kids’ when I am in their classroom.*

Nine percent of the special education teachers acknowledged that others helped in their work with identified students but ultimately felt it was their responsibility to see that services were provided. Others (5%) specifically cited a legal responsibility for IEP implementation as the reason they believed the responsibility was theirs.

On the other hand, nearly half (49%) of special educators indicated that they shared the responsibility of educating students with disabilities with other educators in the school. A representative remark from this group was:

*It is a community here and everyone plays a role. The teacher is responsible for instruction in the general education setting within a community of learners. As help is need[ed], it is provided, and we are a resource for that teacher. It isn’t that it is not my responsibility – it’s that it is all of our responsibility.*

A large subset of this group (24%) described a team approach to service delivery in their school. One teacher’s comments illustrate the feelings of others.

*If you were to come into our classroom, I am a teacher with 46 students, with myself and 2 regular education teachers. We teach all together. Students don’t differentiate between me, as the special educator, and the regular education teachers. I am just one teacher on a team. Inclusive settings create a team effort. These are our students not just my students.*
Other teachers talked about sharing their role with administrators, parents, and related service providers. *There are eight special educators in this building so it is very supportive. It is a shared responsibility with the other teachers, parents, other support staff. It is a group effort. I am never really doing it alone.*

The voices of the teachers conveying their perceptions of their positions provide a picture of rural special education that is both informative and instructive. There were several factors in the study, however, which may pose limitations to the reported results.

**Limitations**

The data are reported in a way that conveys the recurrent themes that emerged. Categories selected by 2% or fewer teachers are not reported. If a teacher’s answer to a question included multiple themes, then the response was recorded in each respective category.

The validity of teacher responses may have been influenced by factors of time, trust, and the order of the questions (Tamur, 1992). Time constraints may have affected teachers’ interpretations of the question and their answer. The limited time frame of the telephone interview may have exerted pressure on teachers to respond quickly to questions that involved complicated relationships and inadvertently encouraged teachers to respond with a perfunctory remark. Moreover, the method of interview delivery did not allow a level of trust to develop and teachers may have had limited investment in providing more than a superficial response. Nevertheless, many teachers did supply lengthy and candid answers and measures were taken to accurately record their perspectives. The sequence of the questions may have also influenced teachers’ responses to include information about support and relationships. For example, questions about the advantages and challenges of teaching followed items pertaining to work-related support.

**Discussion**

The 204 special education teachers in this study expressed their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of their positions in rural schools. Some voiced concerns about the responsibilities of their position and professional isolation; however, others spoke of a caring school community that supported them personally and professionally. From this picture of rural special education, conclusions can be made that will assist rural administrators in facilitating positive working conditions in rural schools and potentially influence teacher satisfaction.

**Challenges to Special Education in Rural Schools**

The teachers in this national sample of rural special educators voiced many of the same concerns as their special education counterparts in urban areas (Billingsley, 2004a). Teachers discussed the challenges of providing services to their students given the constraints of time, budgets, scheduling, responsibilities (e.g., paperwork, co-teaching), and role confusion in inclusionary settings. These challenges have been discussed in the literature as contributors to teacher dissatisfaction and the attrition of teachers in the field of special education (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Brownell et al., 2005; Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Stempien & Loeb, 2002).

An additional challenge, which repeatedly surfaced in the analysis, was the sense of professional isolation. Comments conveying the lack of support from general education teachers, parents, and administrators were common. Moreover, half of the special educators reported that they felt they shouldered the entire responsibility for educating students with disabilities. Of concern, perceptions of professional isolation appear to have a relationship with lower levels of teacher satisfaction and job commitment (Billingsley, 2004b; Cooley & Yovanoff, 1996; Westling, Herzog, Cooper-Duffy, Prohn, & Ray, 2006).

**Benefits of Special Education in Rural Areas**

Despite inherent challenges, most special educators were largely satisfied with the instructional aspects of their position. Many of them felt supported in their role through relationships with others in their school and rural community. To illustrate this relationship between professional support and satisfaction, when commenting about what they liked best about their position, a number of special education teachers centered their remarks
around the supportive community they had in their rural school and small town. Special educators described close knit-relationships among school staff and a greater sense of familiarity with students and their families. This broader knowledge of their students gave teachers the sense they could individualize instruction more effectively and improve student learning outcomes. In addition, half of the special education teachers stated they shared the responsibility of providing services to students with disabilities with other teachers including general education teachers, that teaching was a team effort. However, relationships between teachers were not always supportive. Consequently, special education and general education teachers may need training and administrative support to foster these potentially beneficial relationships.

Implications

In light of the results, the following recommendations would seem appropriate:

1. Administrators should provide teachers with opportunities for both formal and informal support. Such opportunities might take the form of common planning time or other meetings where general and special education teachers can gather, exchange information, problem solve, and discuss student related issues. Local and regional meetings and online connections among special educators can provide a vehicle to develop supportive relationships.

2. Administrators may need to facilitate conversations to help general and special education teachers clearly define their roles and responsibilities pertaining to the education of students with disabilities. Such delineation of roles has the potential to reduce role confusion and role conflict and support collaboration among general and special education teachers.

3. General education and special education teachers may require specific training in different types of co-teaching and how to negotiate collaborative relationships in an inclusive environment (Scruggs, Mastopieri & McDuffie, 2007). Local or regional professional development or in-service training in co-teaching may help to form and sustain supportive relationships.

4. Administrators should provide special educators with support and flexibility with respect to the scheduling of the school day. Teachers should be able to meet the time demands of providing services to students as well as the administrative demands of the position.

5. Administrators should be supportive and resourceful, working with local, state, and federal agencies and funding sources, to help special educators provide the necessary services and technology for students with disabilities.

6. Administrators should provide special education teachers with assistance in the paperwork and clerical responsibilities to lighten the burden created by special education processes.

7. Pre-service teacher training programs, particularly those with a rural focus, need to prepare special educators to teach effectively in inclusionary settings. Pre-service teachers need specific pedagogy to know how to collaboratively plan with general education teachers and use evidence-based practices within the context of the curriculum (Brownell et al., 2010).

8. Rural schools may struggle to provide the services required by individualized programs. As a result, small schools may be forced to consolidate services among several districts (Hodge & Krumm, 2009). Federal and state organizations should provide financial support to maintain small, local schools and capitalize on the positive environments fostered there.

9. Future research may study the factors involved in creating a shared sense of responsibility for special education among all teachers and the components that contribute to this type of essential teacher collaboration.

Much has been learned about the advantages and challenges of rural special education positions by listening to the teachers in this study. The results indicate that teachers and administrators in small, rural schools may be in a unique position to nurture important qualities in their school that matter. Creating a positive working environment has the potential to increase teacher satisfaction and, as a result, improve the quality of the education students with disabilities receive in rural schools.
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This research was a supplemental study conducted by the National Research Center on Rural Education Support, supported by a grant from the Institute of Educational Sciences.
Navigating the Rural Terrain: Educators’ Visions to Promote Change

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Advocates of rural education emphasize the need to examine supports which may promote rural educators given the challenging contexts of which they face. Teacher visioning has been conceptualized as a navigational tool to help sustain and promote teachers given high-challenging contexts. The current study explored 10 public school teachers from rural areas in the Pacific Northwest, and their visions and challenges to practicing their visions in their respective school environments. Findings suggest that visions were described in three domains: visions of students, visions of self as teacher, and visions of school. Teachers expressed visions of self as ‘change agents,’ and often expressed a sense of responsibility and vulnerability as they worked to weave knowledge of effective pedagogy, teacher leadership principles, and self-reflection to implement change in their individual schools.

Key Words: teacher visioning, rural education, and agency.

Rural students comprise 22% of the nation’s public school students, many of whom are faced with issues of poverty and growing high school dropout rates (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Researchers have found that in addition to these obstacles, rural educators’ work is compounded by lack of financial and educational resources; and by limited opportunities for meaningful professional development in their location (Wenger, Dinsmore & Villagomez, 2012). As a result, teacher retention in rural school districts dwindled (Monk, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, [NCES], 2010). As the nation faces increased high-stakes assessment pressures and pay for performance measures (See Race to the Top, 2009), the need to understand the visions of in-service rural teachers who choose to remain teaching in their rural contexts is essential.

Advocates of rural education emphasize the importance of refocusing attention and research to understand supports which may promote rural educators (Burton & Johnson, 2010). Interestingly, scholars contend that teacher visioning has been considered an important tool to help sustain teachers within today’s high challenging educational climate (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2008). A vision has been described as a “teacher’s conscious sense of self, of one’s work, and of one’s mission” (Duffy, 2002, p. 334). Consequently, teacher visioning may be a way to provide a pathway for rural educators to grow professionally, given the challenges of teaching in often-times high-poverty, and resource-challenged contexts.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to explore (a) the salient dimensions of rural teachers’ visions and the (b) perceived obstacles to practicing their visions. We explore the phenomenon of teacher visioning within rural settings of 10 rural educators, enrolled in a cohort Master’s degree program as a way to consider the supports needed to promote rural educators given the post No Child Left Behind era (NCLB, 2001). First, we explored the tensions and difficulties associated with the intersections of one’s identity as ‘visionary’ and ‘classroom teacher.’ Second, we examine the complex visions that developed over time and suggest the need to explore teacher visioning as a navigational tool, given the challenges of teaching in rural schools today. In doing so, we suggest how current educators, teacher educators, and school administrators might embrace teacher visioning as a means to empower, problem solve, and generate solutions to effective teaching within rural school contexts. For the purposes of this study, a teacher’s vision is defined as teachers’ self-reported statement of what she/he wishes to become (Duffy, 2002). The following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the salient dimensions of teachers’ reported visions across time?
2. What are the challenges to enacting visions within rural contexts?

Theoretical Perspectives

This study was informed by social constructivism and teacher agency. Social constructivism suggests that learning is socially constructed through participation in local and situated settings (Vygotsky, 1978). In this way, the teachers in the study made meaning of their experiences, visions, roles, and understandings through their
interactions with one another, through discourse, in-class projects, and the knowledge that developed through their year-long cohort experiences. Accordingly, social constructivism (Tracey & Morrow, 2012) emphasizes the complex learning that occurs within socially-mediated contexts like that of which was created through the cohort experience. In this way, teachers’ reflections, experiences, and interactions within this experience helped to shape their visions. Scholars characterize teacher agency as those actions of which teachers engage to work toward their personal convictions, visions, and beliefs (Paris & Lung, 2006; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2011). A cornerstone of agency is the ability of to take action or to enact beliefs despite compelling situations. As such, teachers are active agents who construct their responses to the challenging contexts of which they face, and respond based on their individual visions, beliefs and knowledge domains (Sloan, 2006; Vaughn, 2013). Taken together, social constructivism and teacher agency provide a conceptual framework to examine the current study by illuminating the ways in which teachers developed their visions through the cohort experience and understandings of ways to enact these visions.

**Locating Teacher Visioning**

Recent explorations of teacher visioning have provided a context for locating teachers as thoughtful professionals combining their knowledge of effective instruction with their personal convictions, and beliefs (Duffy, 2002; Hammerness, 2006). Visions are shaped in part by classroom situations, and the additional experiences in which individuals engage. Educators who teach according to their visions often take action to meet the individual needs of their students, classrooms, or local school and community despite the challenges they may experience (Vaughn & Parsons, 2012). Recently, scholars have begun to explore the perspective of rural educators as they work to enact their personal convictions for teaching. For example, Bates (2011) in his study of rural music educators, found the need to develop “visions” that extend beyond the view of rural contexts as ‘deficient’ sites. Bates (2011) cautioned against a static, ‘deficit oriented’ view of rural schools, when his colleagues described their rural location as a “vast musical wasteland” (p. 94). In highlighting these rural educators’ views, he described the necessity of possessing a vision of what could be within rural contexts (i.e., the affordances of teaching within rural communities: close connection to the community, and a familiarity with the community given its resources). Moreover, he challenged images that many of his colleagues had of rural contexts, and expressed the need to extend these visions “to think critically-to step back and observe…we can help to develop affective and cognitive skills…and help students see that rurality is diverse” (p. 95).

Similarly, the educators in this study viewed their rural schools as complex sites full of potential and exploration.

Goodpastor et al. (2012) highlighted the beliefs and intersections of lived experiences and challenges of six secondary rural educators in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Through a focus interview, Goodpastor et al. noted the ways in which rural STEM educators described the benefits and complexities of teaching science education in high-poverty rural contexts. Moreover, these six educators also noted the many benefits of rural teaching in that there was the strong teacher-parent connection and mutual trust. These studies suggest the importance of examining the lived experiences of rural educators as a way to contextualize rural education beyond often times ‘deficit’ oriented perspectives.

This study provides an in-depth, year-long, exploration of ten rural educators’ understandings of their visions, lived experiences and perspectives of teaching within rural contexts across elementary, middle and secondary school contexts. Moreover, it explores not only the challenges these educators face, but the ways in which these visions developed over time as a way to consider teacher visioning as a navigational tool for rural educators.

**Methods**

The research reported here used a phenomenological study to explore the development teacher visioning (Yin, 2009). In this way, the phenomenon of teacher visioning is examined through the voices of ten rural educators. In doing so, the purpose of this article is to fully conceptualize teacher visioning, agency and the supports needed to promote rural educators given the unique contexts of their particular schools. As such, the current study serves to “explore the meaning of individual experiences and how these meaning can be reduced to a description of the experiences” (Yin, 2009, p. 38).

**Context**

Participants were rural educators enrolled in a part-time Master’s degree program designed to assist them in obtaining their degrees while remaining classroom teachers. Teachers participated in four semesters of coursework and spent six weeks on the university campus taking three intensive graduate
level courses (Educational Philosophy, Theory, and Curriculum Development). The research team comprised of the professors on record for the courses taught within the Master’s program (first and second author).

Participants

The ten volunteer participants were classroom teachers, within a Master’s Degree Education program at a mid-sized public university in the Pacific Northwest. Four participants were male and the other six were females; all were Caucasian. Five of the participants had been teaching between six and ten years. Five had been teaching between eleven and twenty years. All of the teachers worked in rural areas in Idaho and represented diverse subject areas and expertise. Three of the teachers taught in elementary school classrooms, one in special education, one in middle school, and five at the secondary level (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Grade taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>First grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>First grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Third grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sixth grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>H.S. Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>H.S. Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>H.S. Foreign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>H.S. Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jace</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>H.S. Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sixth grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

To answer our research questions (What are the salient dimensions of teachers’ reported visions across time and what are the challenges to enacting visions within rural contexts?) the researchers conducted interviews, focus group discussions, and collected a variety of student instructional artifacts (blogs, visual representations, reflective papers) to gain insight into participants’ visions for teaching. Interviews were conducted by the researchers and occurred four times throughout the duration of the study and were guided by open ended questions to ascertain individual visions for teaching (What is your vision for teaching? Why? What are obstacles to enacting your vision you experience?). The first interview occurred during the first week of the first course in which the teachers participated. The second interview occurred during the fall semester. The third and final interview was conducted in the Spring and Summer semesters. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. Throughout the study, participants were asked to produce a reflective essay and blog entries regarding their understandings of their visions. In total, five blogs were used for data collection as way for the participants to have discussions with one another, and to provide reflection on course readings, their visions, and understandings of their work as teachers.

Focus groups with the participants were conducted four times during the length of the study. These discussions were audiotaped and transcribed for data analysis. These focus groups were guided by the question of (Can you tell me about your vision?) What followed were participants’ responses about their vision and open discussion about what their visions meant to them. The researchers served as facilitators. Instructional artifacts (written responses in class, free writes) were also collected throughout the year to obtain additional insight about each participant’s reported vision and the obstacles of which they reported.

Data Analysis

The research employed a grounded-theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as a systematic and exploratory research tool to provide detailed and rigorous procedures to generate understandings from the data. The first phase of the analysis involved open coding of the interviews and blog entries, which formed initial categories of information about the phenomenon of teacher visioning. These broad initial categories (the challenges of working as a teacher, elementary visions, middle and secondary school
teachers’ visions) led to an understanding of reported visions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In the second phase, we chose core categories (motivation, empowerment, life beyond school, skills oriented, obstacles of rural life, obstacles of elementary school and obstacles of teaching), that appeared in higher frequency across the data. Then, we developed, major categories (visions of self as teacher, visions of school, visions of students) and reviewed the themes. We examined the data through a constant comparative procedure, involving the comparison of data to the categories using the inductive process (from specific to broad). After this, a gradual refinement occurred with the analysis of blogs, focus groups, interviews and reflections from the participants. The overall intent of this process was to “ground” the categories in the data, to eliminate redundancy, and to develop evidence for the categories.

In the following paragraphs, teachers’ visions and challenges are explored as a way to contextualize their respective experiences within their rural contexts. Such work is timely, as the nation continues to face emphasis on high-stakes assessments (See Race to the Top, 2009), the need to consider teachers’ visions and experiences of teaching within rural communities as a way to further retain and support rural educators is imperative.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of data revealed three broad themes related to teachers’ visions for teaching: visions for self as teacher, students, and school. Interestingly, despite that teachers represented a wide range of grades and educational contexts, these broad categories were inclusive to each of the participants. Moreover, although teachers expressed challenges of enacting their visions given the specific nature their individual rural context presented, they appeared to show solidarity in their commitment to continue with meeting the needs of their students.

Vision of Self

At the beginning of the study, teachers were reluctant to view their roles as anything beyond just “a good teacher.” During initial interviews when asked, “Tell me about you,” they identified as that of a 1st grade teacher or science teacher. For example, Jace stated, I am an elective teacher...I teach kids how to use technology (Jace interview, July 2011). However, as the study progressed, teachers began to self-identify as teacher researchers and leaders, often describing their identities beyond the role of classroom teachers. For example, Anna stated, As a classroom teacher and researcher my teaching is based on the experiences I work and reflect on as the type of teacher and researcher I strive to be...I want to become a catalyst for change (Anna interview, July 2011).

Similarly, Maria stated, We [teacher leaders] can change what is going on around us (Maria interview, August 2011). Rachel stated, I will be the person who opens the door, not the one who waits for it to be opened. (Rachel interview, August 2011). Statements like this suggest that teachers began to broaden their understandings of their visions of self as “just good teachers” to that of teacher leaders and teacher researchers who had the capacity to implement systemic school wide change. Interestingly, although teachers expressed the challenges of working with others who did not appear to have the same passion to initiate change, they expressed the need to develop collaboration and to build knowledge with their colleagues. For example, Anna, further captured this idea: I do have a vision to have the ability to be an integral part of the change that needs to happen in education. I believe that even though this is an impossible task for a single person, I do have the capability though my own practice, relationships and action research to inspire change that can really make a difference in my students and their learning and those people on my team and their students. (Anna interview, October 2011)

Across the data, participants expressed an emphasis on working to lead and to make changes at their rural schools. For example, participants like John thought deeply about the needs of their school community and expressed the need to change existing practices in order to achieve their vision. Noting that many of his junior and high school students were disengaged from seeing science as a possible career path, John began to work to build mentoring relationships between older and younger students in science. He initiated a school project where older students mentored younger students and taught hands on science lessons as a way to engage younger students. Through this experience, he noted, “I’ve really seen how older students can really impact younger students and throughout that process, change the way that they think” (John artifact, December 2011).

These rural educators expressed visions of serving as role models for their students. For example, Connor captured this idea in his response, “I come from here. I want to be a role model. It is so important to get kids to know that school is important so they can go to college and live good lives.” Interestingly, like Connor, all participants expressed...
a deep sense of responsibility to their students, and the need to initiate change as a way to promote students’ learning opportunities beyond their current local communities. Such visions may serve to be powerful, motivational messages to rural students. As Goodpaster et al., (2012) found, rural educators’ connections and commitments to their local communities are important factors in promoting student achievement.

However, for rural educators, this responsibility to provide a pathway for future opportunities is precarious. Unlike other larger urban school districts, due to budget cuts and teacher retention, rural schools like those in which these teachers taught that are small and located in remote, rural areas of the country, may be more likely to cancel courses and programs that are desperately needed for students’ future success. In specific regards to this study, the five secondary rural educators taught within STEM fields and were the primary educators, who were responsible for teaching a multitude of subjects (Science Methods, Agriculture Education, Technology, Business Skills). Given the nation’s emphasis on promoting STEM related fields (NCES, 2006) and the availability of STEM programs to support and recruit high school students to colleges and universities, access to future educational opportunities may be at risk if rural educators like those highlighted in this study leave their schools.

Despite this pressure, the rural educators within this study, expressed visions to lead their schools, and ultimately for developing instruction that would fit the individual and specific needs of their students. For example, Tia stated that she did not initially perceive herself as someone who implemented change but that she began to identify as a teacher leader by reflecting on her vision throughout the year. For example, her rural school district mandated the use of a prescriptive literacy program in order to meet the needs of her high-poverty rural students. However, Tia stated that because her vision was to empower her students she needed to do literacy a different way. Testimonies like Tia’s suggest that through examination of visions, teachers were able to enact change, serving as mediators between district, school mandates and their visions of effective instruction in order to meet the needs of their rural students. However, many teachers expressed an identity of a ‘change agent’ while simultaneously, expressed a sense of vulnerability about their work as teacher leaders. Jace seemed to capture the tension of working as a change agent while teaching within a small, rural community. The hardest thing is having to put your neck on the line all the time- that’s where the courage factor comes in (Jace interview, August 2012). Indeed these educators were courageous in their work as visionary leaders despite the tensions and difficulties associated with the intersections of one’s identity as ‘visionary’ and ‘classroom teacher.’

**Vision for Students**

Interestingly, despite the wide grade span across the teachers, there appeared to be minimal differences in their visions for students. Overwhelmingly, the teachers emphasized the need to develop a ‘life beyond school’ perspective within their students, while emphasizing the need to develop academic and dispositional skills given the complex workforce their students would enter. For example, Rachel described her vision as working to prepare students for a life beyond school:

*My vision is to prepare students for life after school, whether that be college or entering the workforce so to give them skills in the specific areas they need- and to more generally how to open something and figure things out. Know how to think through, analyze and problem solve.*

(Rachel, interview, June 2012)

Others also echoed this dimension of fostering a ‘life beyond school’ perspective with their students. John expressed how he worked to structure his science classes so that his students could make connections from the classroom into their real life. In doing so, he emphasized that this could provide a way for his students to see other possibilities for their future: *My vision is that I think they need to learn and to understand…Here’s a concept how does it apply to you in your real life, can you use that or where will you use that in the future?* (John interview, June 2012).

Other participants articulated visions for students where dispositional traits and academic skills were emphasized. Anna stated, *I believe that kids should learn math concepts and communicate their thinking and to see themselves as mathematicians –so as to contribute positively to a larger community* (Anna interview, April 2012). Further, she described her vision of promoting students who were productive, but also could develop dispositional skills she believed were important. She stated, *I want kids to be able to interact with each other and see strengths of others.* Similarly, Casey also expressed a vision for her students as responsible and of which would give to the greater community. *My vision is that I want all my kids to be independent, compassionate, and productive members of society* (Casey interview, June 2012). Shelly also expressed the need to develop collaborative students who possessed the necessary skills to be successful in life. *I would say that my goal is to develop well-rounded individuals…who are able to complete*
something, pull their experiences and knowledge and be able to be successful...to provide them with the skills that so they can use that for whatever they need in their future. (Shelly interview, June 2012)

Like Casey, Michael also expressed the need to develop skills that students could use in their lives after junior high and high school. For example, Michael focused on a vision that included an emphasis on lifelong skills:

*Because I teach Agricultural Education, I truly believe that I need to develop students with lifelong skills that they will be able to use in a career, vocational training, or even around the house. The agricultural industry is all around us, everyone is affected by agriculture, believe it or not, but developing students' abilities to make informed decisions about global food, fiber, and natural systems is important. I want them to learn the skills that they can use in the workforce or further education.* (Michael artifact, December 2011)

Michael expressed the value of using the local environment as a way to build valuable skills and to further promote students' interests in future learning opportunities. Because rural settings may offer greater opportunities for learning of science and nature given students' familiarity with the outdoors (Avery & Kassam, 2011), statements like Michael’s offer insight into classroom practice and policy on pedagogical implications to incorporate nature, and the outdoors to engage rural student populations. Moreover, although rural educators face increasing pressures to increase student performance on high-stakes assessments, as the nation faces increased emphasis on national standards and increased pay for performance measures (See Race to the Top, 2009), experiences like that of Michael point to continued understanding and research into ways to incorporate the natural environment into rural education despite today’s high-stakes accountability context.

Teachers also emphasized the necessity to focus on dispositional skills such as character building and social responsibility. Maria shared, *Building of character of the individual is the heart and soul of this educational process.* She explained her vision as that of building character of individuals through:

*My vision is to promote students how have kindness, care, compassion, fairness and respect [which] is engrained in the moral development of the human being. As the learners understand the connection of humanity within the classroom, they will assume a social responsibility into adulthood.* (Maria interview, April 2011)

Like Maria, such thoughtful responses highlighted a sense of community building within her closely knit school and the local rural community. Rural schools like that of which Maria taught are situated within small communities where teachers often see their students beyond school hours. As a result, rural educators like Maria, have in-depth knowledge of their students’ families, interests, and challenges of living within a rural community.

Throughout the study, teachers’ visions for students remained consistent. That is, teachers’ reported visions that focused on developing dispositional skills in their students (productive, respectful, and independent) while emphasizing visions of fostering ‘a life beyond school’ perspective. Moreover, visions were anchored in developing academic skills that would allow for success within school and beyond their current school lives. Although extant literature emphasizes the rationales as to why rural educators leave the profession (Huysman, 2009) and the negative dimensions associated with teaching in rural schools (Wenger et al., 2012) these testimonies of rural educators’ visions to lead school wide change offer promising insight into pedagogical implications of policy for rural school districts.

**Vision for School**

Many of the teachers expressed an emphasis on respect, trust, and collaboration as salient dimensions of their visions for their schools. For example, Jace shared his vision for his school. *I see collaboration as very important piece at the district level, when teachers from many different disciplines and grades levels have to find common ground for students* (Jace interview, August 2011)

Similarly, Jamie also expressed a vision of a school that embraced relationship building and collaboration as a way to promote student learning and communication. She stated, *I have learned [that my school] must develop and build relationships within our school system just in order to function* (Jamie focus group, December 2011). Indeed, support and collaboration among teachers is a vision that many teachers express as an essential component to teacher retention (Vaughn, 2013) however for rural educators, with limited numbers of faculty, and scarce resources, the challenges to cultivate collaborative relationships is essential to support day to day functioning and student success. Further, John expressed that although he taught in a small, rural community, with its disadvantages of limited resources, such a close community provided what he believed was an untapped potential. Junior high and high school teachers could collaborate and form *a tight and protective bond with their students.*
However, because of their close and often-times geographically smaller communities, these rural educators also reported a sense of fragility in their visions for their schools, given the unique and small communities of which they taught. For example, Anna explained, *At this point, my vision seems inconsistent with the direction that my building seems to be going. I find that I have to ‘fly under the radar’ to do things the way I want to do them* (Anna interview, August 2012). In *flying under the radar*, Anna tried different instructional approaches she believed met the individual and specific needs of their students, but were in conflict with their school administration or colleague’s vision for the school. Overwhelmingly, teachers expressed a emphasis on a vision for a school where there was respect, trust, and collaboration as evidenced in their statements.

### Obstacles to Enacting One’s Vision

Enacting their visions appeared to be teachers’ primary obstacles. For example, Michael expressed the challenges of teaching within a school system where many of his students could not see a vision of their future self as one of his primary obstacles. He stated, *I struggle to get them [students] to understand that yes it’s [a future in science] is just out there and there are applications.* Similarly, John expressed the difficulty of engaging students and the obstacles his students faced that hindered their ability to engage in science and to see science as a part of their future. He reasoned, *Maybe they [students] have other problems at home or other issues that they’re facing. Perhaps it’s just the kids that I have.* Statements like these express the difficulty these rural educators faced when working to enact their visions.

Other challenges included a lack of materials, building mandates, and an overall lack of administrator support. For example, Rachel seemed to summarize the frustration of teaching within a rural school where she often lacked the necessary resources to effectively teach:

*Well, at my school even if you may have the funding for getting the computers, you may not have the funding to buy new textbooks that go along with that or the training. It especially hits with textbooks and computers... so a lot of times you are teaching with older books with a newer program or you are teaching an older program that the kids might not use the next year.* (Rachel interview, August 2012)

John shared the difficulty of working as the primary content area teacher, who was responsible for teaching a multitude of grades. Because of the limited faculty, his colleagues were asked to handle additional responsibilities (test prep, afterschool responsibilities, and remedial tutoring).

*There are some obstacles like, working in the school that I work in being a small rural school. There are a lot of different classes to prep for. And I don’t always feel like I have enough time, I mean just 24 hours in a day is hard sometimes to get six different science preps in. I guess that’s something you just kind of sign up for when you are a small school teacher.* (John interview, August 2012)

Overall, teachers reported the lack of funding to support student learning (i.e., computers, textbooks, faculty, and professional development) as their primary obstacle to practicing according to their visions. Other obstacles to practicing according to visions included the difficulty of school leadership and the challenges of teaching within rural contexts. Research suggests that such challenges often influence teacher attrition and retention in rural contexts (Huysman, 2009).

Despite these challenges, teachers expressed a sense of responsibility in working to enact practices according to their visions given their close ties to their respective rural communities. Given that all of the teachers were raised either in the rural communities in which they taught (n=8) or had lived in that rural community for more than five years (n=2), they expressed deep feelings and connections to their students, school, and community as evidenced in their rationales for negotiating obstacles in order to teach according to their visions. As such, these rural educators faced these challenges and adopted the role of change agent to implement school-wide changes.

The current study examined the visions of ten rural educators from a variety of grade levels, over the course of one academic year, given the challenges they experienced in their rural settings. Visions were multidimensional in nature reflecting visions of self, visions for students, and visions for schools. Of interest to administration, is that among the participants there appeared to be a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to providing access to future educational opportunities for their students, and to promote visions for their students to see a ‘life beyond’ school. Despite the challenging contexts of which these rural educators faced, they expressed a sense of resiliency, commitment and responsibility to their students, schools and rural communities.

The obstacles posed by these rural educators, are similar to the challenges documented of teaching within rural contexts (See Goodpastor et al., 2009). However, unlike Jazabkowski (2003), who suggested that teachers in rural contexts because of their close-knit community often-times teach in collegial settings...
where they are allowed to take risks, the current study found that the work of visionary leaders can be complex. The findings of this study causes the need to consider to the extent to which rural educators feel isolated as they embrace the work of visionary leaders and change agents. Like many teachers, these rural educators worked as ‘back seat’ change agents and often experienced difficulties as they worked to enact their visions. Moreover, such findings highlight the complexity that may occur as ‘visionary leaders’ enter and teach in small rural school communities.

However, findings offer valuable information for teacher educators who work with developing pre-service educators, particularly in those colleges and universities across the country who are in close proximity to rural, high poverty school districts. Implications for rural teacher preparation may include encouraging prospective teachers to develop their visions, cognizant of the benefits of rural communities, with knowledge of effective pedagogy to meet the specific and individual needs of rural students. Findings suggest that teacher visioning may serve as a tool to encourage and to foster individuality and academic creativity. Finally, school administration may be encouraged by these rural educators’ testimonies and their sense of responsibility, courage, and resiliency to do what they believed worked best for their individual students and greater communities.

Conclusion

This study examined teacher visioning and the lived experiences of ten rural educators and has potential to offer insight into teacher visioning as a navigational tool for rural educators.

Findings highlighted the ways in which teachers developed their visions to foster change within their schools and to what they ultimately believed worked best for their students. As rural school districts continue to face post NCLB (2001) pressures to deliver standards based curriculum, the voices of rural educators and the school context of which these teachers face provides important and compelling insight. Although there is literature highlighting the challenges rural teachers, rarely do we hear of rural teacher leaders who have visions of what could be like the ones presented here. Moreover, as the nation continues to face continued emphasis on high-stakes assessments (See Race to the Top, 2009), it becomes even more imperative to take into account teachers’ visions for teaching and the diversity of individual rural communities as a way to further retain and support rural educators.

A limitation of this study is the small sample size consisting of ten rural teachers from the Pacific Northwest. Teachers within this program were considered unique in that they sought to enter into a graduate program while remaining in the classroom. Therefore, the findings may differ with other rural populations. Consequently, results cannot be generalized beyond that of the scope of the current study. Future research may use additional qualitative measures (reflective journals and additional interviews) to examine more fully the development of visions over time and the enactment of one’s vision despite perceived constraints.

References


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Save the Date! October 18-20, 2013 the 105th NREA convention and Research Symposium will be in Branson, Missouri. The theme of this year’s meeting is “A New Generation of Learning in Rural Schools.” The opening keynote speaker is John Nash from the University of Kentucky who will help us focus on the theme and stimulate our thinking. Please view our call for presentations at http://www.nrea.net/viewpdf.cfm?filename=NREA_CallForPresentFlier_021519.pdf

We encourage you to submit a proposal. The research committee leadership has designed a variety of presentation formats. Registration is now open for the conference. An “early bird” rate is available until July 1.

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**Ignite Session:** A cluster of four or five presentations on a similar topic or theme, where each presenter gives a five-minute Power Point presentation. Ignite sessions are intended to stimulate informal, lively discussions and spark interest and awareness of multiple yet similar topics.

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