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Research Article

Why Teachers Remain Teaching in Rural Districts: Listening to the Voices from the Field

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Retaining teachers is a problem in all districts but is especially difficult in rural areas. This survey research asked teachers in a western state to respond to open ended questions regarding their choice for teaching in a rural or urban area. Results indicate teachers work in a rural locale because they grew up in the area, already lived there as an adult, and/or had a spouse/partner with a job in the area. Both rural and non-rural teachers cited the importance of a positive school environment with supportive administrators and good working conditions. Teachers stated inadequate working conditions at school affected their decisions to leave the field. Based on results discussed here, key factors in making teaching a sustainable career and the predominant career challenges that teachers face are more similar across rural and non-rural settings than different, although there certainly are less predominant challenges unique to each setting.

Retaining teachers in the profession is an ongoing issue that has been a topic of multiple research studies and news programs (Buchanan, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, Richardson & Watt, 2014; Rinke, 2007). Yet, school staffing challenges are not primarily due to a limited number of qualified teachers, but instead, low teacher retention is the primary issue. The high rates of teacher turnover and job dissatisfaction primarily are due to limited support and decision-making, student discipline problems, and low salaries (Ingersoll, 2001).

The challenge of teacher attrition is felt especially in rural areas, where districts face difficulties in attracting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers (Oyen & Schweinle, 2021). Several scholars have called attention to a lack of research on teacher shortages in rural contexts and, in particular, noted that general recommendations to address shortages often face unique barriers in rural settings (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). McHenry-Sorber & Campbell (2019) note,

Our review of literature on teacher shortages... finds the attention rural contexts receive is typically limited to the phrase “rural and urban” used as a catch-all for contexts most disproportionately affected by teacher shortages. As our research illustrates, leaders across metropolitan and rural locale types make sense of the teacher shortage in important divergent ways, with rural leaders making sense of the problem largely as something outside their control. (pp. 22-23)

This is especially concerning because almost 30% of public schools in the United States are in rural communities (National Center Educational Statistics, 2014) and almost one in five students enrolled in public schools in the US attend these schools (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). To better understand rural teachers, the experiences of rural teachers, including reasons for accepting positions in rural areas, challenges faced, reasons for staying, and reasons for leaving are presented and compared and contrasted to experiences of non-rural teachers to identify unique rural challenges.

Reasons for Teachers Accepting Positions in Rural Areas

Teachers accept positions in rural schools for a myriad of reasons but often report personal or family considerations (Davis, 2002). Furthermore, teachers accept positions in rural schools due to being attracted to the rural lifestyle and having family close by (Davis, 2002). Other common reasons include being drawn to the challenge of the position and the sense of safety in the school environment (Davis, 2002).

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Rural Areas

Teaching can be a stressful profession that can lead to burnout (Brissie et al., 1988). Preservice and novice teachers face a number of stress factors, including concerns about students, cooperating teachers and families, content knowledge, effective

teaching practices, workload, and time management (Rieg et al., 2007). Teachers in rural settings also face common challenges, such as limited access to resources, isolation, unexpected changes, interactions with colleagues and administrators, social problems within communities, learning about and being accepted by communities, differing values between educators and community members, heavy workload, balancing and overlap between personal and professional lives, and concerns with student attendance, involvement and curriculum (Adams & Woods, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2018)

Reasons for Continuing to Teach in Rural Areas

Despite the challenges faced by teachers in rural schools, factors related to teacher efficacy support teachers' responses to stressors and improve teacher retention (Adams & Woods, 2015). A mixed-methods study of midcareer teachers in predominantly rural, remote Alaskan K-12 schools who had participated in a mentoring program early in their careers found that being prepared with realistic expectations and relevant experiences, community and colleague relationships, professionalism, including collaboration, tapping outside resources and creativity in teaching, and being student-focused, including prioritizing student-teacher relationships and adapting instruction to meet student needs, supported teachers' sense of efficacy and thus, retention (Adams & Woods, 2015).

When asked why they remain at their schools, rural teachers have identified the quality of relationships with students, support from families and the larger community, safe environments and enjoying the rural lifestyle (Davis, 2002). While teachers have named the importance of having previous rural experiences, coming from a rural background does not automatically prepare teachers to be effective in a rural setting, nor should non-rural native teachers be assumed to be ineffective (Azano & Stewart, 2015).

There has been very little research conducted on rural teachers (Arnold et al., 2005), thus, our understanding of why teachers choose to teach and why they choose to stay in rural areas needs to be further explored. This article extends the literature by reporting on the qualitative results from a survey study of rural and non-rural teachers. The following overarching research question was investigated in this study: Why do teachers choose to teach in rural areas, and how do their reasons compare with teachers in non-rural areas?

Methods

This phenomenological study was conducted to investigate why teachers choose to teach in rural areas. The respondent population was teachers in public schools in a western state and were divided into rural and non-rural based on the region selected by each respondent. Data for this study were collected via survey research methods. A total of 10,186 teachers were sent invitations to participate in the study, although 267 had email addresses that were not functional, which resulted in only 9,919 teachers receiving the survey. Of these, 655 teachers completed the survey, yielding a 7% response rate. This response rate is somewhat low, even though follow-up reminder emails were sent to potential participants. The data for this project is from a larger project that is reported elsewhere (Leech et al., 2022).

Procedure

Respondents were teachers working in schools throughout a western state. After obtaining institutional review board approval from the first author's institution, an invitation to participate was sent via email to each participant with a link to the survey which was hosted on REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture), an electronic data capture tool (Harris et al., 2009). All data were anonymous.

Participants

Overall, there was a total of 339 respondents from non-rural areas and 151 respondents from rural areas. Most of the respondents were female (66.5%, $n = 419$; male = 15.4%, $n = 97$; did not respond to the question = 18.1%, $n = 114$). Respondent age varied widely, with 27.0% ($n = 170$) between 21 and 34 years old, 23.5% ($n = 148$) between 35 and 44 years old, 19.7% ($n = 124$) between 45 and 54, 11.1% ($n = 70$) between 55 and 64, 1% ($n = 6$) 65 years or over, and 17.8% ($n = 112$) missing. Ethnic/racial designation was reported as White (72.2%, $n = 455$); Hispanic or Latino (4.4%, $n = 28$); Black or African American (1.4%, $n = 9$); Asian (1.1%, $n = 7$); American Indian or Alaska Native (.5%, $n = 3$); two or more races (2.1%, $n = 13$) and 115 did not respond to the question.

Instrument

The instrument comprised three sections: (a) the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice scale (Watt & Richardson, 2007), (b) open ended questions, and (c) demographic questions. Results from the FIT-Choice scale (Watt and Richardson, 2007, 2008) are reported elsewhere (Leech et al., 2022). The five open-ended

questions reported in this paper included the following:

1. Why did you choose to teach in a rural, suburban, or urban area?
2. If you could teach at any school, what would be your ideal location? Why?
3. Are you planning on leaving teaching? If so, when and why?
4. Do you know others who have left the profession of teaching? Do you know why they left?
5. If you were to mentor a student who was interested in teaching, what would you tell them?

Analysis

Study data were collected and managed using Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) electronic data capture tools hosted at the University of Colorado Denver. REDCap is a secure, web-based application designed to support data capture for research studies, providing: 1) an intuitive interface for validated data entry; 2) audit trails for tracking data manipulation and export procedures; 3) automated export procedures for seamless data downloads to common statistical packages; and 4) procedures for importing data from external sources. The data were imported from RedCap (Harris et al., 2009) to Excel. To analyze the open-ended responses, constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and classical content analyses (Kelle, 1996) were used.

The responses of rural and non-rural respondents were analyzed separately to identify any divergent trends. Because not every respondent answered every question, the number of responses for the open-ended questions ranged from 139 to 146 for rural respondents and from 313 to 325 for non-rural respondents. First, the responses to each question were divided into rural and non-rural responses based on the region selected by each respondent. Second, all open-ended responses were read and analyzed for common topics. Third, common topics were coded and grouped by similarity to identify the larger themes present in the survey responses. Finally, using the codes generated, a count of the number of times each code was utilized was calculated.

Results

Rural and non-rural responses contained many similar themes for each individual question. However, some themes were mentioned more frequently among one group of respondents than the other, and other themes emerged for only one of the

two respondent groups. The sections below present the themes from the analyses for rural and non-rural respondents for each open-ended survey question.

Results from the Constant Comparison Analysis

Why did you choose to teach in a rural, suburban, or urban area? Teachers from both rural and non-rural areas expressed that ties to the community contributed to their decision to teach in the area. Specifically, teachers from both regions indicated proximity to where they were already living was a key factor in choosing where to teach. In addition to the practical benefit of a short commute, respondents expressed that proximity facilitates “having close connections to the families and community” and allows one to give back and make a difference in his or her specific community. Relatedly, respondents expressed the belief that being from the community or a similar one gave them “a unique ability to both relate to, and understand, the kids in [the] community”. Beyond existing ties, the desire to live in a specific community was mentioned as contributing to rural and non-rural respondents’ decision to teach in a given area. Rural teachers expressed the desire to live in a rural area due to the proximity to the outdoors, benefits of a small community, and enjoyment of the rural lifestyle, whereas non-rural teachers were more general in expressing their desire to live in a non-rural area.

Rural and non-rural respondents also mentioned that job opportunity factored into their decision, frequently citing that “as a ‘new’ teacher, fresh out of college, you take what you can get” due to the difficulty in securing a teaching position with little or no teaching experience. Rural teachers additionally noted the lack of other available careers impacting their decision to teach, with one respondent stating, “I live in a small town in a rural area so the choices were limited. I choose to live here, therefore I choose to teach here.”

School and district characteristics were mentioned by both rural and non-rural teachers as factors impacting their decision of where to teach. Rural respondents often mentioned availability of school and community resources and small class and school size, while non-rural responses tended to discuss school and district culture, having the “skills best suited to serve [the] particular student population,” and a desire for higher pay. Although both groups of respondents also cited student racial/ethnic diversity as a factor in choosing where to teach, non-rural teachers tended to discuss student racial/ethnic diversity in terms of their desire to serve traditionally underserved populations to combat inequity in public education while rural teachers were

more general in their desire for a racially/ethnically diverse student population. Rural community teachers were likely to see their students and students' families at the store, church, the gym, etc. Most students in the rural areas of this western state identify their race/ethnicity as white; therefore, if teachers hope to work with racially/ethnically diverse students, they would need/want to teach in a non-rural area.

If you could teach at any school, what would be your ideal location? Why? A frequent response among both rural and non-rural teachers was that they are currently at their ideal location. When specific reasons were given for why they are currently at their ideal location, respondents cited having support from the administration and community, a positive working environment for staff, and a good learning environment for students. For those teachers who identified an ideal location other than where they are currently teaching, the most commonly mentioned characteristics identified as ideal matched the school characteristics cited by respondents working in their ideal location. In addition, non-rural educators, regardless of whether or not they worked in their ideal location, often mentioned having a diverse student body as ideal.

Other features identified as ideal among respondents not currently working in their ideal location involved a different physical location or teaching environment. Rural responses identified being in a rural area as ideal because it allows for building "more meaningful relationships with the kids, staff, and community" and the community "is concerned about the education of every student." Non-rural respondents frequently identified living in close proximity to the school as ideal in order to limit commute time and "be viewed as a contributing member of the community and [to] develop strong relationships with the families." Additionally, a number of non-rural respondents identified being in an urban area as ideal. Non-rural and rural responses also discussed salary and pay in reference to their ideal teaching location. Rural responses tended to frame the ideal as teaching where salary covers the cost of living, while non-rural responses tended to frame the ideal as higher pay.

Respondents in both groups mentioned private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and other alternative learning environments as ideal locations due to the different teaching environments they provide for students and educators. Although some responses indicated the desire for a different environment stemmed from wanting a more convenient or less challenging teaching position, responses more frequently indicated that the desire

for different teaching environments resulted from being "committed to helping the students who struggle the most" and wanting a better learning environment for their students.

Are you planning on leaving teaching? If so, when and why? When asked if they planned on leaving teaching, responses included no, not until retirement, maybe, yes, and already left. Among both rural and non-rural respondents, over twice as many indicated that they were not planning on leaving teaching than respondents who indicated that they were planning on leaving teaching.

Of those who said they were planning on leaving or may plan on leaving, low pay or the need to work another job was the most commonly cited reason among both rural and non-rural teachers. Some respondents stated that they "don't earn a livable wage [and] live paycheck to paycheck," while others detailed that they "work two or more jobs to make ends meet." Other frequently mentioned reasons for planning to leave the teaching profession were poor working conditions and personal well-being. More specifically, respondents indicated "the hours are grueling," "the emotional demands and workload are not sustainable," and they often receive "zero support or encouragement from administration."

Do you know others who have left the profession of teaching? Do you know why they left? Over ninety percent of rural and non-rural respondents who answered this question indicated that they knew others who have left the teaching profession. Over half of respondents in both groups cited that low pay or the ability to make the same or more in an easier job was a reason why others left the profession. One respondent stated, "Teacher salaries can't compete with most professional jobs." Other common reasons given for why others left teaching among both rural and non-rural respondents were lack of administrative leadership or support, the workload and associated time commitment, stress or being emotionally drained, and the high demands of the career. Respondents often indicated that such reasons were intertwined as the combination of increased workloads and lack of administrative support led to stress and a "high demand of their time and energy." Lack of respect was also mentioned by both groups although it was more frequently mentioned among non-rural respondents. Responses indicated that lack of respect often manifested itself as "not being looked on as professionals" by the community, school administrators, and district leaders.

Other, less frequently mentioned reasons for leaving included the inability to support family on a

teacher salary, burn out, poor interactions with students or parents, early retirement, and retirement.

If you were to mentor a student who was interested in teaching, what would you tell them?

The most common response among rural and non-rural respondents was that they would say that teaching is a difficult job, but it is also rewarding. Respondents mentioned the ability to impact the lives of students and the future as rewarding parts of teaching. A number of respondents also focused on the need to be passionate about teaching because “you have to love it or the frustrations aren’t worth it.”

Both groups of respondents also frequently indicated they would offer general career and teaching advice to a student who was interested in teaching. Advice tended to focus on how to make teaching a sustainable career choice, including directives to maintain a work-life balance, choose a school or district that is the right fit, and continue to learn and grow in order to do what is best for students. Respondent advice regarding work-life balance emphasized the importance of self-care, specifically telling students interested in teaching that as a teacher they should “go home at a reasonable hour” and “take time to recharge.” School and district fit were discussed in terms of being able to “find a place with a supportive culture where you can develop your skills” and “know your teaching philosophy and find a position that fits.” Advice around continuing to learn and grow focused on the need to “share and listen and learn from experienced teachers,” and “be willing to be a life-long learner.” Both rural and non-rural respondents also proposed considering other career options and the implications of a teaching career before committing to the profession. In conjunction with such advice, many respondents included the desire to discuss their own personal experiences in order to provide “insight into the life of a teacher” and share the realities of teaching.

Less frequently, respondents indicated they would tell a student interested in teaching to not pursue it because of the demands of teaching and the lack of respect and appreciation for the profession. In addition, although mentioned by both rural and non-rural respondents, rural teachers more frequently mentioned low pay as a reason to pursue a different career.

Results from the Classical Content Analysis

To better understand the frequency of themes, we conducted a classical content analysis (Kelle, 1996). The count of the codes is presented in Table 1.

Discussion

Previous research (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019) noted a lack of specific attention to teacher shortages in rural areas. A primary focus of the current study was to discover unique barriers to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural settings by comparing survey responses of rural and non-rural teachers in one western state. Findings suggest that there are certainly some unique motivations for and barriers to teaching in rural areas and, at the same time, teachers also share many motivations and challenges regardless of geographical setting. The following paragraphs discuss factors associated with remaining in teaching and career challenges teachers face and suggest potential strategies for addressing the most common issues.

Several reasons emerged as strong contributors to being able to thrive as a teacher in a setting. The most frequently cited reason for why teachers work in a rural or non-rural locale was because the teacher already lived in that locale. Having grown up in that specific area or a similar area was another important contributor toward a good fit between the teacher and the setting. This acknowledges the importance of familiarity with and appreciation of the typical lifestyle in whichever setting, rural or non-rural, in which the teacher chose to work. Additional related reasons for good fit included having family and other personal connections in the area, which supports previous findings (Davis, 2002). Coming from the specific community or a similar one allows teachers to more easily relate to and share values with students, parents, and the community. This was more commonly true for teachers in rural areas where being accepted socially and relating to the community may be more challenging and similar to findings in previous studies (Adams & Woods, 2015; Davis, 2002; Hellsten et al., 2018). Although being from the area or a similar one is not a guarantee of a successful teaching career (see Azano & Steward, 2015), this study provides evidence that it is one important component for many teachers in contributing to professional success. Similarly, being from the area or one like it is not a requirement for a successful career and, in fact, this study and others (Davis, 2002) also found that simply being attracted to a rural lifestyle could be an important factor.

Clearly, though, reasons for selecting and thriving in a teaching position go beyond liking the lifestyle and being familiar with it. Unique to rural respondents was the importance of their spouse/partner already having a job in area. Presumably, this is important because job opportunities may be more limited in rural communities and thus it could be more critical that a

Table 1
*Classical Content Analysis Results of Themes **

Survey Question	% of Rural Responses	Themes	% of Non-Rural Responses
	15.75%	Already lived in the area	24.53%
	15.75%	Job opportunity	12.73%
Why did you choose to teach in a rural, suburban, or urban area?	15.75%	Desire small town, rural lifestyle	-
	10.27%	Spouse's or Partner's job moved to the area	-
	9.59%	Grew up in the area or in a similar area	-
	9.59%	Desire to be near the mountains	-
	-	Desire to serve traditionally underserved populations	12.73%
	-	Desire to live in the area	10.25%
	-	Grew up in the area or in a similar area	9.63%
	33.81%	Currently at ideal location	28.12%
If you could teach at any school, what would be your ideal location? Why?	20.86%	Positive school environment (e.g.: supportive administrators, good working environment, etc.)	23.64%
	10.79%	Different type of school (e.g.: charter, magnet, virtual private, etc.)	15.65%
	16.55%	Rural	-
	-	Urban	13.10%
	11.51%	Close to the mountains	-
	-	Closer to home	17.25%
	-	Particular student populations (e.g., diverse)	13.10%
	55.48%	No/Not until retirement	57.72%
Are you planning on leaving teaching? If so, when and why?	28.77%	Yes/Maybe due to poor working conditions (e.g. workload, lack of administrative leadership, lack of respect, etc.)	23.46%
	17.12%	Yes/Maybe for own personal well-being	9.26%
	14.38%	Yes/Maybe due to low pay	18.52%
	6.85%	Yes/Maybe to pursue a different career in education	9.88%
	54.55%	Yes because of low pay	53.54%
Do you know others who have left the profession of teaching? Do you know why they left?	25.87%	Yes for personal well-being	31.38%
	19.58%	Yes due to lack of administrative support or leadership	21.54%
	18.88%	Yes due to workload/time commitment	20.92%
	16.08%	Yes because demands of career are too high and/or keep increasing	15.08%
	12.59%	Yes for financial reasons (e.g.: cannot afford childcare, cannot afford to live in the area, etc.)	11.69%
	-	Yes due to lack of respect for the profession	15.69%
	31.72%	Job is difficult, but rewarding	34.98%
	29.66%	General career or teaching advice (e.g.: maintain a work life balance, choose where you teach carefully, don't take	33.44%
If you were to mentor a student who was interested in teaching, what would you tell them?	13.79%	You need to be passionate about teaching	17.65%
	13.10%	Discuss personal challenges, working conditions, etc. to share the realities of teaching	16.41%
	13.10%	Pay is so low you can't make a living	-
	-	Consider the negatives and positives of the job before deciding	9.29%

*Top five most frequently occurring themes displayed unless two top themes were mentioned equally or more than ten percent of respondents mentioned themes outside of the top five.

spouse/partner already have a job and not be dependent on having to find one. The desire to serve traditionally underserved racial/ethnic populations was a motivational factor indicated by non-rural teachers that did not surface as often in rural responses.

It is also clear that enjoying living and teaching in a rural or non-rural setting does not mean the teacher necessarily is satisfied with their school of employment. Approximately one-fourth of respondents indicated they are looking for a more positive school environment with more supportive administrators and better working conditions, supporting findings from previous studies (Ingersoll, 2001).

Complaints about inadequate working conditions at school also affected teachers' decisions to leave the field. While over half of these teachers indicated they plan to continue teaching until retirement and an additional group (fewer than 10%) planned to leave teaching to pursue career advancement as an educator, approximately one-third of responding teachers plan to leave the profession. There were problems cited across all settings predominantly related to poor working conditions and risks to personal well-being. The unsatisfactory working conditions included large workloads, lack of administrative leadership, and lack of respect. The issues teachers cited as significant contributors to their plans to leave the profession were also the causes of colleagues who left. Overwhelmingly, financial reasons (low pay, inability to afford child care, and inability to afford the cost of living in the area) were cited by about two-thirds of respondents as having caused colleagues to leave for other careers. Many of the same working conditions and financial challenges were cited in earlier studies as well (Adams & Woods, 2015; Hellsten et al., 2018; Ingersoll, 2001).

Interestingly and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, despite the significant challenges they faced, teachers' advice to someone considering entering the profession was most frequently positive. The most common piece of advice about teaching was that although the job is difficult, it is rewarding. Teachers would advise prospective candidates that they need to be passionate about the work in order to be successful. Other commonly mentioned advice included a caution that working conditions could be personally challenging and, specifically mentioned by rural teachers, that the low pay could make it hard to make a living.

It is important to understand why teachers choose to work in rural areas to identify potential malleable areas to consider to attract more rural teachers and increase their retention rate. The

information revealed in the survey points to steps teacher preparation programs and/or school and district leadership might take to recruit and retain teachers for rural settings and steps that might be beneficial for teachers in all settings.

Teacher preparation programs can influence directly candidates' exposure to the daily aspects of being a teacher through extensive and deep field experiences. This would allow new teachers to enter the profession with realistic expectations and self-awareness of the type of setting and school climate that will provide a good fit and thereby make it more likely they will stay. By providing field experiences in both rural and non-rural schools, preparation programs would allow candidates to experience a variety of settings. Early field experiences, programs where candidates work as a para-professional, teacher residency programs, and alternative licensure programs that require candidates to be full-time teachers while they are in the preparation program, among others, are examples of extensive exposure.

Findings from this study indicate that school and district leaders have several malleable areas where they may be able to positively impact teacher attrition. In rural schools, leaders may want to consider recruiting locally into an alternative licensure program as an avenue for finding teachers most likely to stay. For both rural and non-rural leaders, maintaining good working conditions is very important for retaining teachers. This includes instilling positive school culture and climate, ensuring the availability of school resources, setting reasonable workload expectations, providing encouragement to teachers, and treating all teachers as professionals. Additionally, to the extent possible, maintaining small class sizes and providing higher pay and/or other financial incentives the school or district may have access to would contribute to attracting and keeping teachers.

This study suggests that rural teachers may have stronger ties to their geographical setting than non-rural teachers. Teachers' relationship to place and how that influences their commitment to teaching in the specific community they have chosen to teach is one area for further investigation.

Findings in this study are based on a voluntary sample of survey respondents from one state and additional samples of teachers from other states would help reinforce or clarify results from this study. There may have been a response bias if teachers who were especially happy—or especially *unhappy*—with their places of work were more inclined to respond to the survey.

This study contributes to other research on teacher motivation to teach in rural and non-rural settings and the career challenges they face. It is important that a

teacher settles into a position in an environment that can provide the lifestyle they seek. While not a requirement for or a guarantee of success, it seems to be helpful for a teacher to be from a community setting that is similar to the one in which they teach. Based on results discussed here, key factors in making teaching a sustainable career and the predominant career challenges that teachers face are more similar across

rural and non-rural settings than different, although there certainly are less predominant challenges unique to each setting. Realistic expectations, self-awareness of school climate preferences, working conditions, personal well-being, and financial issues are challenges, most of which would seem to be within the purview of teacher preparation programs and/or district and school leaders to ease.

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