

## Teaching in Rural Saskatchewan: First Year Teachers Identify Challenges and Make Recommendations

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*Despite the existing research on rural education, rural teaching, and pre-service rural practicum placements, there is little research on the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Saskatchewan beginning teachers who obtain employment in rural or northern schools. Eight beginning teachers voluntarily participated in a telephone interview during their first year in the teaching profession. Their interviews highlighted shared themes related to the challenges of working in rural and northern communities, including: acceptance; understanding the community; isolation; overlap between personal and professional lives; and impact of rural context on workload. In addition, participants made recommendations for teachers considering employment in these environments, including: preparing to obtain a rural teaching position; seeking out mentorship relationships; and making connections within and outside of the community. These shared themes are discussed within the context of existing literature, and recommendations are made relating to future directions for research in this area.*

**Key words:** Rural beginning teachers; challenges; recommendations; experiences.

Although most new teachers feel prepared for their first year of teaching (McPherson, 2000), some beginning teachers report an inability to cope and describe feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the demands of the profession (Rogers & Babinski, 2002). Beginning teachers may experience difficulties adjusting to school culture, procedures, and expectations as well as in modifying their university education to fit their current school culture (Khamis, 2000). These difficulties may be amplified by the unique challenges of teaching in a rural community (Monk, 2007). Rural environments can be geographically, socially, culturally, personally, and professionally isolating (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). Prospective rural teachers are often unprepared for rural life and may have idealized preconceived ideas which lead to disappointment when proved incorrect (Sharplin, 2002) or deter them from accepting rural positions (Miles, Marshall, Rolfe, & Noonan, 2004). It can also be difficult to retain quality teachers in rural jobs (Schwartzbeck, Redfield, Morris, & Hammer, 2003), as many rural teachers do not renew their contracts upon their completion (Miller, Paterson, & Graham, 2005). Challenges to rural teaching include a lack of professional support (Ralph, 2002) and insufficient instructional materials, supplies, and equipment (McCoy, 2006). Multiple subject area responsibilities (Beesley, Atwill,

Blair, & Barley, 2010) and the need to teach “multiple grades, sometimes in multi-grade, mixed-age classrooms” (Barley, 2009, p. 10) further complicate some rural teachers’ placements.

It is important to examine the realities of beginning rural teachers since their early experiences have long term implications for teacher effectiveness, job satisfaction, and career length (McCormack & Thomas, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges and rewards experienced by eight beginning teachers in rural and/or northern schools in their first year of employment.

### Context of Study

Saskatchewan is one of Canada’s three prairie provinces, located between Alberta to the west and Manitoba to the east. With an area of 251,366 square miles, its boundaries extend from the US border along the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel to the border with the Northwest Territories along the 60<sup>th</sup> parallel. Provincial population estimates (2010) were 1,041,729 inhabitants of which approximately 15% self identified as Aboriginal (Government of Saskatchewan, 2011).

Saskatchewan currently has approximately 160,000 students enrolled within the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education,

2009). Among the 721 schools active in the 2008-09 school year, 371 (51.4%) were rural, 327 (45.3%) were urban, and 23 (3.2%) were located in more isolated communities in the north. Within the Saskatchewan context, rural communities are generally defined as those having a population less than 5,000 people (Saskatchewan Education, 2009).

### Methods

All 2005-2006 education graduates employed as a teacher in some capacity (e.g., classroom teacher, substitute teacher etc.) in the province were contacted in 2007 and invited to participate in a study of the experiences of beginning teachers in Saskatchewan. From the pool of interested participants, maximum variation sampling was used to select 12 final participants stratified by pre-service teacher education program (secondary vs. elementary trained), gender, Aboriginal heritage, and current school location (rural, urban, or northern schools). This study reports on the first year experiences of eight beginning teachers who taught in a rural and/or northern Saskatchewan school.

Participants were interviewed near the end of their first year of teaching by one of three trained interviewers using a semi-structured interview format. Interview questions included items pertaining to the school context, teacher workload, supports and resources available for teachers, as well as challenges faced, and recommendations for other first year teachers. Interviews were conducted over the telephone with the use of an audio recording device and were approximately one hour in length.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were provided with the opportunity to alter their transcripts to ensure that they accurately reflected their experiences. In order to ensure anonymity, participants were provided with pseudonyms and identifying features such as geographic location names were fictionalized. Following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used to identify repeated patterns of meaning from the experiences of the eight beginning teachers while also speaking to the differences in the set of interviews. The three authors reviewed the participants' interview transcripts and made note of the themes arising in the data. The authors endeavored to ensure the coding of the transcripts and the interpretations made from the codes were "data driven" and constructed from the "raw information" contained in the transcribed responses to the interview questions (Boyatzis, 1998, pp. 30-31).

### Participants

Six of the eight participants in this study were female. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 34 years old. Two of the participants (Angela and Jake) were married. Although Lisa identified herself as being of Aboriginal descent, all other participants were Caucasian. Participants held a variety of teaching positions (e.g., full-time, replacement, or temporary teaching positions). Lisa and Mandy taught in a northern school division while all other participants taught in a rural school division. Lisa and Angela taught primarily elementary school (K-6), Jake and Chantelle taught primarily middle school (5-8), and Emily, Brayden, Samantha, and Mandy taught either Junior or Senior High school (7-12). Half of the teachers were responsible for teaching only one grade and/or one major subject area. However, Chantelle and Angela taught multiple grades, Jake taught split classes, and Samantha taught in a multi-grade, mixed-age classroom. Jake and Angela each taught in two separate schools.

Teachers taught in a variety of communities. Communities varied in size of population (i.e., villages vs. towns), first language of the majority of students (i.e., Cree, French, English), religious beliefs (e.g., Mennonite communities), ethnicity (i.e., Aboriginal, Caucasian), and primary economic industries (i.e., agricultural vs. logging). Schools ranged in size from 50 students in Kindergarten to Grade 12 in one school to midsize schools with approximately 500 students. The diverse communities in which the participants were living provide a representative snapshot of the variety of rural and northern environments beginning teachers encounter in the province of Saskatchewan.

### Findings

Analysis of the beginning teachers' interviews highlighted shared themes relating to the perceived challenges of working in rural or northern communities and provided recommendations for beginning teachers considering employment in these environments and for teacher education programs (Table 1).

### Challenges

In the interviews, beginning teachers shared the challenges they faced when working in a rural and northern community. These challenges included: acceptance, understanding the community, isolation, overlap between personal life and professional teaching life, and the impact of the rural/northern context on the work.

Table 1  
*Themes Arising for Challenges and Recommendations*

Challenges	Recommendations
Acceptance	Preparing to obtain a rural teaching position (e.g., coursework, rural internship, personal connections)
Understanding the community	Utilizing mentors to help reduce professional isolation
Isolation	Becoming involved in the community
	Building a professional network
Overlap between personal and professional lives	Making and maintaining personal connections outside the community
Lack of resources	Set aside personal time
	Preparation programs need to provide specialized training for teachers who will serve in these settings
More work because of rural/northern context	More generalist options in teacher education programs

**Acceptance.** None of the beginning teachers in our study found employment in their home towns. According to Emily, the lack of previous contextual knowledge might be an advantage.

*I think if I had been in the community before, it would probably be a situation where I went to school with your younger brother or sister or I used to babysit you or I know your parents. So then you kind of have these preconceived notions that I think can really change how you work with students.*

Beginning teachers are balancing a new career and often the relocation to a new town. For participants in our study, all but two of the beginning teachers were required to relocate for their employment. Acceptance of the new teacher into the rural or northern community did not appear to be an issue for beginning teachers such as Angela or Jake who already had ties to the community. As Angela stated, *"I've been in this community for just about five years.... It's my husband's community and they've welcomed me with open arms right from the beginning."* Jake felt that his existing connections to the area helped him be accepted by the communities in which he taught.

*My wife is a teacher as well. She ended up teaching here. So we moved up here and yeah, kind of really liked the area and didn't want to go anywhere, so I applied... I had also interned at the one school.*

Other newcomers to rural and/or northern communities also spoke of the welcoming atmosphere of their new communities. Mandy noted.

*Even when I came up here for the interview back in June, everybody was so friendly. They wave to you on the street. I went into a café for lunch and people asked, "Hi. How are you? Are you the new teacher? ...When I moved up here, people immediately came out and helped me move in. So I felt very welcome.*

Despite a welcoming atmosphere, the relocation experience was challenging for Mandy, Samantha, and

Lisa. For example, Mandy said, *"Coming into a community that I didn't know has made it a little more*

*tough [sic]."* Samantha shared, *"It's intimidating. It's extremely uncomfortable being somewhere where you don't know anybody."* Even having previous experience growing up in or living in a rural or northern community did not always prepare participants for the relocation. Lisa, who grew up in and completed her education degree in a northern community, experienced unexpected challenges moving into her new community. When asked, *"Do you think you were scrutinized by not having grown up in the community?"* she replied, *"Yes... and being a full treaty Aboriginal woman [did not help]... There really aren't that many [female full treaty aboriginal teachers]... so I think that worked against me [being accepted]."*

However, being accepted by the community is not the only challenge when working in a rural environment. Beginning teachers also have to learn about the community they are living in.

**Understanding the community.** Beginning teachers reported challenges in attempting to understand their community, the community-school and community-teacher relationships, and the expectations of their community. The participants spoke of a diverse set of community experiences. Some experiences were very positive. For example, Mandy stated, *"There is a lot of respect for teachers in this community."* Lisa also described the positive relationship between her school and her community: *"I just think of teamwork when I think of our school because everyone works together and its very community oriented."* Mandy expanded on her positive experiences:

*If we want to talk about how the community perceives the school and the teachers.... They [parents] know that education is so important for their kids and they*

*trust the teachers. That's a great feeling to know that they trust my decisions.*

However, despite her positive experiences, Mandy's ability to teach was impacted by some significant issues in her northern rural community: *"There's a lot of fetal alcohol; there's a lot of substance abuse problems and it carries into the school."*

Samantha and Mandy reported having difficulty deciphering and meeting community expectations. For Samantha, her frustrations involved the level of teacher involvement in student extracurricular activities dictated by the community. *"Like curling, outside sports is especially huge. They [the community] just think that teachers should be doing this . . . the expectation that I see is coming from the community."*

For Mandy, the expectations evolved from the problems inherent in the community.

*The community views the school as a crutch. We're supposed to do everything, to fix everything- to fix all the problems in the community.... There are some big expectations on the school...but it's just not realistic.*

Beginning teachers are left to figure out the expectations of the community relating to being a teacher, and the relationship between the community and the school. If teachers do not have assistance or guidance from other teachers or community members, then they may feel alone or isolated.

**Isolation.** Feelings of isolation, especially social isolation, geographical isolation, and professional isolation were identified in detail by Samantha, Brayden, and Chantelle. For example, Samantha stated, *"My grandma would come visit me, they'd leave, and I'd start crying. They wouldn't even be in their vehicle and I was crying."* Social isolation was often accentuated by the geographical location of the rural or northern community. In response to a question about how far the community in which this teacher was working was from a major urban center the same teacher, Samantha, replied *"it's a very good trip 2.5 hours...3.5 hours from [a major urban center]."* Other comments included feelings of isolation despite being in close proximity to individuals within the community and school itself. The social isolation seems to come from not knowing anyone or lacking peer interactions. Chantelle stated, *"Everybody else is from here, and they kind of either grew up here and stayed here or else it's been so long that they're pretty well established... I'm the only girl in this entire village that's my age."* The lack of facilities and opportunities for socialization seem to make feelings of isolation worse. Chantelle elaborated, *"Yeah. I'm just so social. [It] was like hitting a brick wall. No gym, no running room."* In response to a question about being new to the community,

Brayden replied, *"I felt a little isolated, just being new and also, just having so much work to do I can't really get out and socialize much."* Chantelle and Brayden also spoke about professional isolation. Brayden said, *"This being such a small school, no one else teaches the subjects that I teach."* Chantelle concurred: *"I am the only teacher that teaches English. I am the only teacher that teaches art.... You can't really go see anyone else unless they've taught those languages or they've taught art and none of them has."*

Due to the isolation of the rural and northern teaching positions, some beginning teachers did not plan to remain in their current positions. Chantelle had requested a transfer and commented that she was surprised by her original posting. She commented.

*I specifically told them [school division]... I don't want to be sent somewhere where there's going to be so much culture shock....and then they pitch me up north...but I thought I'll tough it out for a year and then you can ask for a transfer.*

Beginning teachers not only experienced personal and professional isolation, they often felt that their personal and professional lives could not be kept separate in a rural or northern community.

#### **Overlap between personal and professional lives.**

The beginning teachers in this study appeared to struggle with finding a balance between professional and personal lives. As Lisa said, *"At the beginning I was going in [to school] a lot in the evenings."* With more experience came new coping methods and a better balance. *"I learned to manage my time better, so I go in now at eight and leave at five every night. And then I go in Sunday evening."* Mandy also created her own coping method: *"I try and do my work at school and avoid bringing it home with me. Because I know that's what I'll spend all my free time doing instead of relaxing and finding time for myself."*

The rural and/or northern context also appeared to impact the amount of overlap between teachers' personal and professional lives over and above what might be expected for all beginning teachers. On the one hand, a welcoming community fosters acceptance. As Angela stated.

*The difference when you can go to the grocery store and ten people ask you how you're doing and they actually care. They want to know more about you. They want you to be a part of their lives. It has really, really helped a lot just making me feel comfortable and confident in what I'm doing.*

However, the negative side of the welcoming small town atmosphere is a lack of privacy. Angela also noted.

*You can't do absolutely anything without them noticing. If you're sitting on your patio step and you're having a beer with your friends, somebody's going to walk by and they're going to notice and they'll tell somebody else. So you have to be really confident in knowing who you are and what you believe in.*

Chantelle spoke at length regarding the lack of activities and isolation coupled with the overlap between personal and professional time. One solution to boredom was going to the local hangout *"but then you go to the bar and there are the parents [of my students] and that's not good."* Samantha expanded on this negative: *"You have all eyes upon you. The way that you act in public definitely reflects on who's there... you don't want to do social drinking and [sic] any kind of other things that would be deemed inappropriate."*

Emily also described not being able to get away from the students they taught and their families. *"Most of my students are working at some of the places that I go to. So if I go out for supper, I usually run into one of the students."* Samantha also noted that *"Your Sunday afternoons aren't your time...I've gotten phone calls from parents...it's invading your space and your time and it's not on school time."* Samantha summed up the situation by stating, *"You're a teacher twenty-four/seven regardless of what you're doing or where you are."* It is not only a challenge for beginning teachers to balance their personal and professional lives, it is also a challenge in rural/northern areas to balance workload and contextual issues and demands. Although all beginning teachers in this study reported their first year of teaching was tough, most beginning teachers also spoke about the unique aspects of teaching in a rural or northern school that added to their workload. Access to resources is one such issue.

**Resources.** When teachers are employed in a rural or northern environment, they may not have easy access to resources in the community to support the development of curriculum (e.g., local library, or stores carrying classroom specific supplies). They often have to rely on materials that are available in the school environment. Mandy was challenged by a lack of resources brought about by school policy, community interaction with the school, and a previous teacher.

*The community has taken all my equipment out of my storage room. I have nothing left to teach with.... We're only allowed a box of paper per year and our school is out of paper now so we can't photocopy assignments. The teacher before me didn't leave any of the resources in the classroom.... That's been the frustrating thing and I think that's what has been consuming a lot of my time as well, because I have to sit down and think of resources.*

The lack of resources seemed to add to an already heavy beginning teacher workload.

**Workload.** Sometimes, the nature of the teaching contract impacts the workload. Angela and Jake both accepted employment positions that were split part-time between two schools. Angela found a resource difference in terms of preparation time between her two schools. *"In my half-time position I get absolutely no prep time at all. In my other position I get some and it helps, it really does... you can just sit and plan."* Jake found that being one of three part-time teachers in a very small school substantially impacted his extra-curricular workload. *"It's a real hard thing to properly give them [students] things like, you know, extra-curricular time and things like that."* Chantelle made a similar statement with respect to the impact of the rural and/or northern context on her extra-curricular workload: *"I'm the only female teacher on the high school level, [in] pretty much all the sports, I'm implicated."*

In smaller schools a single classroom may house multiple grades if enrolment is low. This may increase class size as well as increase the planning time and work load for rural and northern teachers. Chantelle and Angela both experienced teaching multiple grades, while Samantha and Jake experienced teaching split-grade classrooms. Angela stated, *"There are lots of multi-grade classrooms, and because we're a rural school, everybody's becoming more and more taxed with their job loads"* In response to a question about his preparation for teaching split classes, Jake responded, *"The only thing is the class, like that class [split class] of 33 is a bit of a monster at times... It's a hard thing sometimes to kind of control the circus that can go on."*

Chantelle, a rural teacher of multiple grades, also spoke to the impact of diversity on multi-grade, multi-level classrooms.

*A large percentage of them [students] have predominant learning issues. ... I wouldn't mind if you had one class. Like if I had a class of Grade 6 and 7's in a year, that's not that bad. But when you have so many levels and so many subjects to teach, whether you like it or not, it's overwhelming.*

Mandy, teaching in a northern community challenged by social issues, also experienced the demands of students with a variety of learning levels. *"If we're comparing these kids to kids down south, my average kids who are getting 70-80 percent here would be below average down south. It's very high needs."* Brayden found that the geographic diversity of his students added to his workload, especially with respect to providing additional help. *"Some of them it's easier to help in-class, others want the help out of class, others can't get the help out of class because they're bussed in."* In contrast, Jake admitted that the rural and/or northern context may result

in less outside of school commitment: *"It's nice in a rural school because the kids have to be on the bus at 3:15 PM, so [there's no after school]. I mean there's one night a week where I have to coach a game."* In addition to these identified challenges, participants also commented on issues they felt future beginning teachers in a rural or northern school should consider.

### **Beginning Rural Teachers' Recommendations**

Beginning teachers also highlighted recommendations for peers considering employment in rural and northern educational environments, including: preparing to obtain a rural teaching position, utilizing mentors to help reduce professional isolation, and developing connections inside the community and connections outside the community.

### **Preparing to Obtain a Rural Teaching Position**

Sometimes, a rural and/or northern teaching position is found simply by being open to the idea of such a position. As Mandy advised:

*People coming out of school and applying for teaching jobs are really selling themselves short by thinking "I'm just going to apply to the city." They just don't understand what positive things can happen if they go to a new community.*

Emily was open to a position in a rural and/or northern community and obtained her position in rural community through a traditional route. *"When the school had been at our career fair, they had mentioned to me that this position would be coming available, so I just kept my eyes posted and then I just applied for it."* However, rural and/or northern teaching jobs are not always easy to find. Lisa found herself interning in the north and followed that experience with a year working in a non-teaching position within the school prior to being hired at her current location. *"It's hard to get a job. Usually you have to work term positions before you end up getting a full-time position because there's just so much competition there."*

Being open to the idea of a teaching position in rural and/or northern Saskatchewan may come naturally to teachers who grew up in such communities. Personal experience in rural and/or northern communities may be advantageous. As Angela stated, *"I knew that, especially because I grew up in a small town, I knew kind of how a smaller school worked where the kids kind of worked together and you knew everyone and everyone knew you."*

Other beginning teachers in this study recommended that teachers interested in working in a rural or northern environment should prepare specifically for obtaining a rural teaching position by planning undergraduate course

work and practical experiences to cover general teaching areas. Mandy shared, *"I made sure that I taught out of my subject area so that I did have that experience."*

According to Mandy, having training across grade levels and academic subjects, prepares teachers for working in a variety of environments. *"I really wish that it [pre-service training] could have been more generalist- so that we would know the curriculum from K to 12 and have been trained in [it]."*

Another means of preparing for a rural or northern teaching position was to specifically request an internship experience in a rural and/or northern school. Teachers in our study (Lisa and Jake) who had experienced such an internship believed that their internship experiences helped prepare them for employment in rural and/or northern communities as well as ensured they were recognized within the school district or community. For example, Jake said, *"I mean, because I interned at that K-8 school, I mean I knew what I was getting into and I didn't have any doubts about it."* Lisa had a similar story. *"I interned there and then I worked for a year at the preschool - it helped that they got to see me. They got to see me teach before and they knew who I was."* Lisa also felt that taking her education program in the north helped to prepare her specifically for employment in the north. *"I took my university in Lac du Bleu, they taught me things that were in the school already... I think it helps going to school in the north like the northern perspective and the cultural part of it and everything."*

Common perhaps to finding employment anywhere, teachers in our study suggested that prospective teachers utilize any of their existing rural and/or northern personal connections to help obtain employment in rural communities. Previous connections to the community can assist a teacher in obtaining a job. As Lisa stated, *"with the smaller communities, it's not how good you are, it is who you know, too when you get a job."* Similarly, Jake used his spouse's connections to the community to obtain a teaching job, *"it kind of helps to have some kind of backdoor channels and people knew about me."* Utilizing existing connections, preparing specifically for employment in a rural or northern school, and forging professional relationships with experienced teachers can help beginning teachers find employment.

### **Utilizing Mentors to Help Reduce Professional Isolation**

Some beginning teachers in this study found themselves feeling professionally isolated teaching in a rural and/or northern community. As Mandy said, *"At first I was feeling very overwhelmed. I didn't feel that I had a lot of support from my administration.... They*

*don't really have a mentorship program here."* In a similar situation, Angela compensated for the lack of an official mentorship program by finding her own personal mentor. *"It wasn't anything that was set up through the school or the division or anything like that. I guess I had a personal mentor.... Just another teacher in the school that I could visit with after school."* Mandy also found a mentor on her own.

*I just went out and naturally found it [a mentor] on my own. I'm not sure that I specifically needed someone to say this is going to be your mentor for the year, but it would have been a little bit nicer.*

Brayden also stated that a formal mentorship program would have helped his initiation into the teaching profession.

*Maybe having an official mentorship program in effect could have been more helpful off the beginning.... If we had a cross division program where I could talk to another senior math teacher about "how would you teach this?" that might help.*

In contrast to Brayden, Emily was formally assigned a mentor in her subject area. *"Every first year teacher has a mentor within the school. They try to match it up as close as you can, so my mentor is also a senior science teacher."* As Brayden predicted, Emily's mentor was able to provide subject specific teaching advice. *"So my mentor, which is something that this school also offers, has been really great in giving me advice and just being someone to kind of bounce ideas off for that."* Like Emily, Samantha was assigned an official mentor but did not find the relationship helpful. Instead, Samantha sought her own mentor who was better able to help her work through her questions and concerns.

*My [assigned] mentor ... has about 5 years of experience teaching but I feel like he doesn't have the emotional maturity or experience that I need as a first year teacher. I need somebody that has a lot more experience to be able to give me ideas of how to handle situations or what to do.... I currently confide in and talk to a teacher who has almost forty years experience.... I prefer him because even though he doesn't teach in my area he has that much experience.*

The practical restrictions of small schools such as those in rural and/or northern communities may limit the effectiveness of programs, such as professional mentorship, regularly used in more urban or populated areas. This leaves the beginning teacher to seek support outside of the school environment.

### **Making Connections within the Community**

Despite the lack of time most beginning teachers in this study spoke of, most teachers also recommended making connections within the community. For example,

Lisa suggested getting *"more involved with their community."* Brayden stated, *"I've tried to get to really know the kids really well. At parent teacher interviews I actually try to get to know the parents.... I've tried to make the connections."* Samantha also recommended showing an *"interest in the community and the students, inside the school but outside as well."* She also shared that the first thing she did upon moving to her new location was to *"find a place to live in the community and then, trying to get connected to the community. I did a lot before school [started], like, I attended community things."* In contrast, Emily spoke of her lack of community involvement and how that lack may have been counterproductive. *"I'm not pressured into being involved in the community but I'm also not coming in with some ideas about who my students are because I haven't been in the community."* However, what does *involved* in the community mean? Samantha elaborated.

*Make it a goal and priority to get out in the community; to show support for the students outside of school. Attend volleyball tournaments, attend hockey games, it shows that you are interested in them.... You have to sometimes mix with the community even if you feel like you are not a part of it.*

Brayden also spoke of the importance of making connections to the community. Brayden was fortunate to attend a welcoming assembly at the beginning of his year with *"community members and school students and all staff."* In retrospect, he found that activity to be significant. *"It got my face out there so people actually know who I am when I go into the grocery store or go to buy gas."*

Emily spoke of connections she had made with other teachers in her town, *"I am really grateful that there are other first year teachers who are there with me because then... [if] I had a really bad day and then somebody can kind of relate to you."* Mandy also spoke of the importance of connecting with other professionals in the community. *"To be accepted as a newcomer into the community is huge. To know that somebody is there to support me, to have coffee with someone instead of being locked up in my house, that makes or breaks a person."* Samantha recommended that by getting involved, new teachers may become accepted by the community and feel less isolated. She advocated.

*Take time to find those people that you can approach professionally, personally, socially and in your life, so that you have somebody to go to if you need to get out of the house or if you are isolated in a small community with their cliques and you don't feel like [you can] go out.*

Beginning teachers felt it was important to find connections within the community to support their

teaching efforts and to forge connections outside of the community in which they live and work.

### **Making Connections outside of the Community.**

Although making connections within the community, becoming involved in the community, and utilizing mentors within the community were seen as important, in order to repel feelings of professional and social isolation beginning teachers in our study also recommended making and maintaining connections outside of the community.

Chantelle spoke of meeting her boyfriend and the importance of spending time with him outside of the community where her school is located. *"We're [Chantelle and her boyfriend] struggling with the long distance....living up here, if I didn't have a weekend occupation [visiting her boyfriend], I would go crazy. It's really isolated."* Lisa spoke of taking advantage of a professional development opportunity to leave her community to network. *"And I am going to [urban center] on Thursday to do some networking. Just to get some different ideas and see how teachers... just to get more ideas."* Samantha spoke of the importance of finding interests outside of the community in which she was currently teaching: *"Find other avenues which you might want to get involved in.... I'm becoming a newsletter editor. Make sure that you are connected to other educators in the field as well as a small town person."*

Beginning teachers in this study highlighted the challenges they have experienced, and made recommendations for other beginning teachers who might be considering employment in rural or northern environments. It is important to now consider how these findings relate to existing literature.

### **Discussion**

Similar to previous research (e.g., Barley, 2009), the rural communities in which the beginning teachers in this study taught were diverse. Despite the differences among the communities, beginning teachers in this study identified common challenges and provided recommendations for teaching in a rural or northern school. Each of the challenges and recommendations identified by beginning teachers in this study are supported in the literature.

In order to obtain a rural teaching position, beginning teachers in this study recommended being open to and obtaining teaching experience in rural communities. Hudson and Hudson (2008) stated that, "Instilling confidence and empowering preservice teachers to teach

and live in rural areas require[s] first-hand experiences" (p. 74). Previous research with beginning teachers suggested employment with rural districts evolves from prior work experience, preparation (academic and professional), contract provisions, reputation, and initiative, such as using personal connections to gain employment (Storey, 2000). New teachers in rural schools need to be prepared for the "conditions of rural teaching" including appropriate credentials and a knowledge of the "nature of small schools in small communities" (Barley, 2009, p. 10). More specifically, Sharplin (2010) recommended pre-service teachers obtain practice teaching outside their proposed teaching area(s) and preferred grade(s). Sharplin (2002) and Lock (2008) urged education programs to consider including more pre-service rural and remote experiences. A pre-service internship and/or practicum experiences allow teachers to "overcome their anxieties and develop confidence in their skills and abilities as rural teachers" (Sharplin, 2010, p. 25). A rural or northern community internship or practicum placement also provides schools with the opportunity to *try-out* a potential teacher for a rural or northern teaching position (Munsch & Boylan, 2008).

Beginning teachers in this study found being accepted by their rural or northern community challenging. Pre-service teachers have also identified acceptance by the community as a perceived challenge of working in isolated communities (Munsch & Boylan, 2008; Sharplin, 2002). In order to obtain community acceptance, beginning teachers need to become involved in the community and make community connections. Community connections help reduce the potential for social, personal, and professional isolation. However, beginning teachers in this study found it challenging to meet the demands of their communities. A study of rural pre-service teachers identified this same challenge, "Compared to the city, where you can become lost at four o'clock... here, you are expected to teach, to coach, to go to curling, and to squeeze in attending your students' hockey game" (Ralph, 2003, p. 29). The time and energy required to become an accepted community member is yet another requirement for beginning teachers who are new to their rural communities.

Research suggests that the onus to get involved in the community should not only be directed to the beginning teacher. In order to foster positive attitudes and feelings of belonging, school divisions and communities should make an effort to connect beginning teachers to staff and community members (Lowe, 2006; Ralph, 2003). The development of a peer support system for education graduates and beginning teachers who choose to teach in rural areas could be initiated by the teacher education institutions (Lock, 2008). Rural schools should have an

induction or assistance program in place for teachers who will be new to the school community (Lowe, 2006; Sharplin, 2002). Beginning teachers may be more willing to take positions and remain in rural and northern communities if they are supported and valued within the school environment and the community.

Similar to previous research examining teacher relationships in small communities (Huysman, 2008), beginning teachers in this study found it difficult to navigate the overlap between professional and personal lives. For teachers in rural and/or northern schools, “disappearing into the community or fading into the background is not an option” (Miller, Paterson, & Graham, 2005, p. 12). Beginning teachers also reported the limited availability of personal leisure-time activities. Even when activities were available, they were not always accessible to the teachers due to the need to act *professional* at all times. “Educators in rural schools experience a more intensively scrutinized professional life than their urban counterparts” (Goddard & Havermann, 2001, p. 92). Munsch and Boylan (2008) reported similar findings, with their participants stating “everyone is in each other’s business” (p. 19).

There appears to be a fine line between feelings of isolation and overexposure in rural and northern communities. If beginning teachers do not make an effort to connect to the community, their feelings of isolation may grow, causing them to leave their teaching position. However, since lack of privacy is a major challenge for beginning teachers in remote communities, new teachers could be encouraged to make and sustain personal and professional connections outside of the community. Beginning teachers need to find a balance between developing social relationships and guarding their personal space and time from being inappropriately invaded (e.g., weekend phone calls from parents). Discussing these concerns and brainstorming possible solutions could be part of pre-service training or orientation to a rural teaching position.

Experiencing increased work demands because of teaching in a rural/northern context were additional challenges reported by beginning teachers. The context of rural schools affected several of the teachers in this study in that they were required to teach split grade classes or multiple-age, mixed classes. When working in

a multi-age classroom, beginning teachers are often required to spend extra planning time preparing to teach diverse skill levels (Barley, 2009). Previous research has also identified the lack of supplies and resources as a challenge associated with teaching in a rural community (Munsch & Boylan, 2008). Being creative, using existing materials, and sharing resources with other teachers in the school may help address the challenge. Discussing these rural context-related issues and considering effective time management strategies (e.g., coordinating lessons across curricular content) could be part of pre-service training.

### Conclusion

Although few studies have examined the experiences of beginning teachers in rural communities, and even fewer have examined Canadian beginning teachers’ experiences, this study is limited to the experiences of eight Saskatchewan beginning teachers. Despite the focus on Saskatchewan, the thematic findings demonstrate that the challenges faced by Saskatchewan rural teachers are similar to the challenges faced by rural teachers around the globe. Furthermore, many of the suggested recommendations of the Saskatchewan teachers were echoed in suggestions made by others. Pre-service teachers intending on finding employment in rural and/or northern locations should obtain first-hand teaching experience with these communities. Beginning teachers in rural communities need to balance their involvement in their communities with personal and professional networks outside the community. Teacher education institutions and rural school boards should consider mentorship and peer support programs to help beginning teachers transition into their positions.

Further studies need to be conducted to build on these initial findings and help both academic institutions training pre-service teachers, and school administrators hiring for these rural and northern teaching positions, understand the feelings and experiences of beginning teachers. The realities of teaching in rural communities should be discussed and become an integral part of pre-service teacher education so that beginning teachers can be better prepared for dealing with the day to day demands of working in a rural or northern environment.

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