
2021

Positive Influences on Why They Stay: A Qualitative Study on the Contributing Factors to Teacher Retention in Rural North Dakota

Jennifer Jung

Minnesota State University Moorhead, jennifer.jung1@k12.nd.us

Follow this and additional works at: <https://red.mnstate.edu/ijgll>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Elementary and Middle and Secondary Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Other Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#)

ISSN: 2692-3394

Recommended Citation

Jung, J. (2023). Positive Influences on Why They Stay: A Qualitative Study on the Contributing Factors to Teacher Retention in Rural North Dakota. *The Interactive Journal of Global Leadership and Learning*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.55354/2692-3394.1037>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by RED: a Repository of Digital Collections, the repository of Minnesota State University Moorhead.

Positive Influences on Why They Stay: A Qualitative Study on the Contributing Factors to Teacher Retention in Rural North Dakota

Abstract

In the United States, a considerable amount of educators leave the field within the first five years of employment. Midwestern rural schools experience a slightly higher turnover percentage than do their urban counterparts. Due to this shortage of teachers, many districts have employed strategies to recruit and retain effective teachers. Although many studies focus on the reasons teachers exit the profession, this study identifies the positive factors of why teachers remain in a rural North Dakota school. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach which generated common themes among long-staying teachers in a rural district. Both the social constructivism and teacher career cycle theoretical frameworks were utilized to support the researcher's understanding of rural teachers' feelings, perceptions, and experiences. The positive attributes of working in a rural community are the personal relationships teachers make with students, families, and colleagues and the strong support from administration and mentorship from colleagues.

Keywords

teacher retention, rural, qualitative, retention factors, social constructivism, teacher career cycle

Author Bio

Jennifer Jung, Ed.D., is an elementary principal in Jamestown, North Dakota. She values her instructional leadership role and enjoys working with new teachers in the field of education. She received her Elementary Education degree from Dickinson State University, her first master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Chadron State College, her second master's degree in School Counseling from Lamar University, and most recently her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership from Minnesota State University Moorhead. Her research interests include teacher retention, teacher recruitment, and educational administration.

Introduction

Many schools across the nation encounter teacher retention challenges as the educator shortage continues to increase. When a teacher leaves a district, and the position remains unfilled, the students, staff, and administration experience the negative impact of understaffing. The demand for quality educators is not a new problem but conversely dates back several decades. In the 1980s, several national reports were published, drawing attention to the anticipated teacher shortage in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 1984).

Nationally, approximately 40 to 50 percent of teachers choose to leave the profession within the first five years. There is no question why several states have implemented programs to retain teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ulferts, 2016) as effective teachers play an essential role in student achievement. According to some researchers, an effective teacher is the single most fundamental school-related determinant of student achievement (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Ulferts, 2016). As noted through a comprehensive literature review, the research reiterates the undesirable consequences of the teacher shortage for both rural and urban districts. More recently, Sutchter et al. (2019) examined the current trends in teacher supply and demand, analyzed the severity of the labor market imbalance, and investigated what is likely driving the teacher shortages across the nation. They also asserted the relevance of induction programs and improving teaching conditions to increase teacher retention (Sutchter et al., 2019). Teachers who feel satisfied in their current teaching situation are more likely to stay, regardless of the district's population.

The 'revolving door' associated with teacher attrition creates hardships for the remaining staff and administration, resulting in diminished academic opportunities for students. This cyclical pattern creates dissonance in the educational environment,

inadvertently influencing student achievement (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Stronge & Hindman, 2003; Ulferts, 2016). Education is viewed as an occupation that relies on consistency within schools, which is disrupted by turnover (Ingersoll, 2001). When the turnover rate is high, which is often the case in rural schools, districts often hire inexperienced teachers, negatively impacting student learning (Varathan, 2018). The researcher's first-hand experience with teacher turnover made an impact on district decision-making practices. Year after year, the vacancies created challenges as several positions remained unfilled, which fueled the researcher's desire to find a solution to the problem. This publication uses data collected from the researcher's Ed.D. dissertation, *Positive Influences on Why They Stay: A Qualitative Study on the Contributing Factors of Teacher Retention in Rural North Dakota* (Jung, 2021), which was guided by two research questions:

1. What factors contribute to the retention of experienced teachers in rural North Dakota?
2. What are the commonalities among teachers who remain employed in a rural North Dakota school district?

Using qualitative data, the researcher understood better the reasons rural teachers remained in a field many others have left.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two theoretical paradigms: Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism and Huberman's (1989) and Steffy and Wolfe's (2001) teacher career cycles. Utilizing two theoretical constructs drives the researcher's understanding of the complex nature of teacher retention. The constructivist viewpoint holds that there is no single reality but rather a combination of realities to be interpreted while discovering underlying

commonalities between individuals' experiences. Among these multiple realities, universal themes emerged throughout the research process.

Constructivism is associated with qualitative research and uses language as a catalyst for constructing the reality of one's experiences (Walker, 2015). The general assumption of constructivism is the individual's acknowledgment of reality based on what they already know and new knowledge attained throughout the process (Richardson, 2003). Social constructivism follows the understanding that meaning and knowledge are constructed in the human mind, impacting our thoughts and choices through social interactions. According to Thomas et al. (2014), "Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge that focuses on how individuals come to construct and apply knowledge in socially mediated contexts" (p. 3). This framework aligned well with this research study as participants interviewed provided responses based on their own lived experiences. Vygotsky (1978) states:

In order to create such an enabling theory-method in the generally accepted scientific manner, it is necessary to discover the essence of the given area of phenomena, the laws according to which they change, their qualitative and quantitative characteristics, their causes. It is necessary to formulate the categories and concepts that are specifically relevant to them - in other words, to create one's own capital. (p. 8)

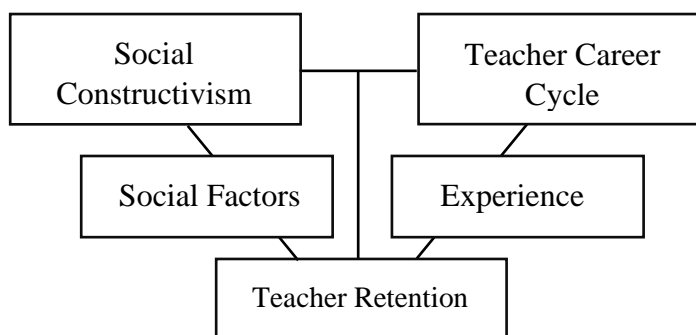
In addition to social constructivism, two models of the teacher career cycle were applied to the research. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) characterize six phases of development that begin with novice status and complete the cycle with retirement. The participants chosen for this research were practicing in the professional teacher phase, signifying several years of experience in the field. According to Steffy and Wolfe (2001), during this phase, teachers

have experienced growth in self-confidence; they seek opportunities to collaborate with their peers and recognize the value of observation and reflection.

In addition, Huberman (1989) includes three phases in a teachers' career cycle: novice, mid-career, and late-career. Mid-career teachers are noted as stable and confident about their professional knowledge, are seasoned teachers experimenting with new teaching strategies, and reflect on their instructional practices (Huberman, 1989). Teachers practicing in their mid-career or late-career phase were selected as participants for this study. With the knowledge that nearly 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years, it was essential to the researcher to choose long-staying teachers as their experience offered data that validated their longevity. Figure 1 below illustrates the two theoretical frameworks and their combined influence on teacher retention.

Figure 1

Theoretical Frameworks Influencing Teacher Retention



Methodology

The study adhered to a qualitative phenomenological approach by examining the factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain employed in a rural North Dakota school.

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p.44)

Considering qualitative work is primarily descriptive, it is crucial to capture the phenomenon's essence by clearly identifying 'what' the participants experience and 'how' they experience it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Kakkori (2009) describes phenomenology as the study of an essence and hermeneutics as the process of interpretation. Applying a hermeneutical phenomenological approach guided by a social constructivist viewpoint was suitable for this study. From an ontological perspective, the reality of working in a rural community was established. Furthermore, from the epistemological perspective, the researcher began to understand the participants' realities through their lived experiences while engaging in the interview process.

A phenomenological approach is the foundation of the qualitative study. "The purpose of qualitative analysis is to interpret the data and the resulting themes, to facilitate understanding of the phenomenon being studied" (Sargeant, 2012, p.1). Giorgi's (1976) methodological model of phenomenological research guides and supports this research study. Giorgi first developed phenomenology as a research methodology that focuses on a qualitative description of the world as lived by a person through a cultural context (Langdrige, 2017). Giorgi (1976) implies that "one does not use language derived from explanation systems or models in the initial description, but precisely every day, naïve

language” (p. 311). Langdridge (2017) explains how Giorgi’s method remains widely used in phenomenological research worldwide.

Langdridge (2017) shares phenomenological methods are primarily descriptive in nature as opposed to an explanatory stance, through which they are focused on a description of the phenomenon's essence. For this reason, a small sample size, which is characteristic of a phenomenological study, allowed the researcher to focus on the various participants’ experiences. A purposive sampling method of contacting 23 superintendents was first identified as an appropriate method of securing participants; however, that method resulted in zero potential participants. To address the lack of response rate, the researcher shifted the method of procuring participants. It was important to maintain the integrity of the study, so a snowball sampling method was employed, which according to Creswell (2012), is a form of purposeful sampling where the researcher asks others to recommend potential participants. This method proved much more lucrative, and seven participants were selected. Table 1 below outlines the participants’ characteristics and demographics in more detail.

Table 1

Table of Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Region	District Enrollment	Elementary/ Secondary	Average Class Size	Extra-Curricular Assignments
Participant S	32	2	289	Elementary	18	yes
Participant D	9	3	316	Secondary	17	yes
Participant T	30	4	321	Elementary	13	yes
Participant B	22	5	260	Secondary	20	yes
Participant A	27	6	262	Elementary	17	yes

Participant C	8	7	253	Elementary	18	yes
Participant V	22	8	142	Elementary	11	yes

Note: Participant Demographics

Upon consent, the participants engaged in semi-structured interviews. The open-ended interview questions examined the participant’s feelings, experiences, and beliefs about working in a rural school. All questions were indeterminate in nature and encouraged reflective responses. The questions were intended to elicit feedback that established the foundation for answering research question one. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the researcher must listen carefully to what the participants say and how they describe their life experiences. All individuals represented rural communities across the state, offering more generalizable data for the educational leaders and policymakers in North Dakota (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Regional Map of North Dakota



Note: Figure 2 referenced from <https://www.ndaco.org/about-ndaco/regions-map/>

Langdrige (2017) described one complaint that phenomenological methods are too descriptive and do not offer enough analytic depth. While this may be true for some studies, this study sought a deep understanding of the phenomenon of long-staying rural teacher retention, which can only be examined through personal questions that elicit an honest and thorough understanding of their experiences. Giorgi's (1976) phenomenological data analysis method guided the process through data collection, reducing the data into themes or meaning units and finding meaning in the participants' responses. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) ethical framework with the implementation of an audit trail and conducting member checking of the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of spoken and written words. The researcher compared the raw, written transcription against the audio/video recording and revised any incorrect words or phrases, whereby the transcript was then sent back to the participants for final verification. The researcher also acknowledged her 'positionality' within the research to follow ethical research standards.

Before conducting research, this study was approved by Minnesota State University Moorhead's International Review Board (IRB) on August 22, 2020. Two specific ethical challenges pertaining to this study were the researcher-participant relationship and guaranteeing the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants and school districts to which they refer. To minimize the researcher-participant relationship's ethical issue, all participants were unknown to the researcher. For this reason, no participants from current or previous school districts of the researcher were utilized for this study. Considering the ethical concern of anonymity and confidentiality, all data were assigned a pseudonym with no identifiers.

Results

This phenomenological study aimed to understand the complex nature of the factors that influence teachers’ decisions to remain teaching in a rural North Dakota school. The data described in detail the participants’ experiences of working in a rural school for several years and, in some instances, decades. Additionally, the essence of the phenomenon was verbalized by long-staying teachers.

Although three themes emerged as a result of the in-depth interviews, for the purpose of this article, only a subset of the results is discussed in detail.

1. Teachers value connectedness and personalized relationships.
2. Teachers value administrator support and colleague mentorship.

Table 2 encompasses a snapshot of the two themes and the subsequent meaning units derived from the data, spoken words, and direct quotes from the participants. In addition, each participant disclosed perceived challenges associated with employment in a rural school district; however, none seemed problematic enough for the individual to consider leaving. Those results are discussed in this article as the findings are imperative to note as policymakers and administration attempt to create a school environment that fosters continued employment.

Table 2

Snapshot of the Researcher’s Analysis Process

Theme 1: Teachers value connectedness and personal relationships.		
Meaning Units	Verbalized Words/Phrases	Participant Responses
Student Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know them personally • Working with students • Develop good rapport • Growth in students 	<p>“I get to watch my students grow up. I get to have my students for three years in high school, which is a big plus.”</p>

Families/Parents Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know all your students • Intimate • Know their parents • See them in the community • Friends 	“You also know your parents, and it’s just being part of the community.”
Colleagues Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships • Sense of community • Easy to connect • Friends 	<p>“The relationships with my colleagues, we are very close, and it’s very strong.”</p> <p>“It’s because they [large schools] are spread out, and there’s just not that connection because there’s so many staff in each building....trying to get everyone together, so there’s probably not consistency.”</p>

Theme 2: Teachers value administrative support and colleague mentorship.

Administrative Support/Colleague Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very Supportive • Without their help • Good administration • Best principal 	<p>“Our elementary principal turned admin is our best principal ever.”</p> <p>“On both ends of the building [referring to elementary and secondary], we’ve had so much more support.”</p>
Teacher Mentorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help each other • Supportive • Mentor program • Transitioning 	“My mentor was a world of wealth for me my first year.”

Note: Table 2 represents the researcher’s process of data analysis.

Theme 1: Teachers value connectedness and personalized relationships.

Participants express the word “relationships” 29 times throughout six of the seven interviews. These relationships reference teachers' connections with students, families/parents, or colleagues. As the participants spoke about their experiences, each specific relationship has its own characteristics and value to their personal careers. The researcher needed to differentiate between the relationships as they are incomparable.

Students

The relationships developed with students were found to be relevant by all seven participants. Working in a K-12 school allows teachers to watch children grow from young children to young adults. Participant A shared:

My favorite thing is the relationships at any age. You know it doesn't stop just when they leave your classroom because, in small districts, we see them in the halls, we see them at recess, we see them at lunch, we see them on morning duty. So, we can still continue those relationships. I think that's a great gift; you get to keep seeing them grow.

The participant above articulated that “we all have to take our turns and do morning or afternoon and, I guess, afternoon recess.” Although the responsibilities are coupled with their teaching assignment, these extra duties of recess, lunchroom, or hallway supervision help solidify the long-term relationships with students. When asked what the teacher values most about working in a rural school, participant B acknowledged, “I think the relationships I'm able to have with the students.” Participant D also described developing a strong rapport with students as one of the positive attributes of working in a rural school. Participant T declared, “you just seem to know all of your students so much closer (pause in speaking), intimate.” In all, the teachers' responses indicated the value of student relationships to their career satisfaction.

Families/Parents

Five of the seven teachers also recounted the continued relationships with families and parents as favorable to their satisfaction. Participant V articulated:

It's the atmosphere where you walk in, and we have lots of comments from people, salespeople, that come [into the building], and it's like everybody here knows everybody. The kids are not afraid to help out, and if you need something, you just need to put the word out, and you have parents that will bring it or grandparents will bring it, or one of the kids will bring it, it's just like a family basically.

When asked what specific factors have contributed to your positive thoughts, experiences, or feelings about working in a rural school, three teachers mentioned the significance of ongoing relationships with families as they have had the pleasure of teaching multiple family members. The participant from Region 4 shared how her established relationship with a family was beneficial to serving one of their children. She learned of the student's autism diagnosis through communication with the family, which allowed her time to prepare adequately for his arrival. She explained how their close relationship allowed the family to disclose specific details related to the child's unique needs, which inadvertently helped the teacher address the student's defined social-emotional and academic needs.

Additionally, when asked if external factors have led to the participants' longevity, Participant A shared that family relationships outside of school are important to her. She voiced how she and a family worked together to uncover a medical condition that impacted the student's ability to read. In the absence of a trusting relationship, the teacher felt this important discovery would not have occurred. Participant A went on to share:

We had that relationship, and then, of course, she kept in touch when they were doctoring over the weekend, and [she] sent me all of the updates. We are probably closer than you know, most of my families, and you know it just happened with me because I have had two of her other kids.

Most teachers in rural North Dakota teach in a single-section elementary school, meaning there is only one class per grade level. This school makeup is conducive to building long-term relationships with families as they engage in repeated interactions over several years.

As noted by several participants in this study, family relationships are vital to supporting students in school. Family/parent connections and relationships foster positive feelings related to teaching in rural North Dakota schools. The parent/family relationships transcend the school walls and are built within community activities as well.

Colleagues

Participant C and Participant A affirm their relationships with colleagues have influenced their decision to remain teaching in a rural school. Participant A expressed, “the collaboration with colleagues is just more personal in a small district, and they are my support system.” Participant T shared, “it is just so easy to connect with my colleagues.” These three participants felt the relationships with their colleagues were imperative to longevity in a rural North Dakota school. Furthermore, participant D values the collegial relationship that enhances the collaborative effort of teaching across content areas.

In summary, the connectedness and relationships between rural teachers and their students, families, and colleagues are crucial characteristics that exude pleasant thoughts about working in a rural school. The strong relationships developed by all participants were evident and have proven beneficial to their retention. It is vital to note that relationships were referenced by all seven participants, thereby making it an important theme for the study.

Theme 2: Teachers value administrative support and colleague mentorship.

Some participants’ responses from the study suggest targeted support as a determining factor in remaining in the field. Teachers acknowledged the impact of support from their

colleagues and their administration as beneficial to their careers. The researcher is compelled to explain further that the reported support originated from both administrators and colleagues, whereas the mentorship stemmed from colleagues alone.

Administration

Five of the seven participants vocalized numerous positive affirmations associated with their school administration. Participant A described the school-wide impact of hiring an additional principal for their K-12 building that previously had only one administrator. She stated, “We have a very strong principal right now; we haven't always had that. There was a time where we had a K through 12 principal, and that principal was spread too thin, and we couldn't get the support we needed.” This expansion of administrative staff made a considerable difference in teacher support, which was beneficial for both the elementary and secondary teachers.

Participants B and V confirmed administrative support includes both the superintendent and principal, referring to the impact of support emanating from the principal and the superintendent in their rural buildings. Participant V mentioned, “The elementary principal and superintendent stand in the hallway in the morning to greet kids as they come in and to check on the staff. Does anybody need anything today? Is everyone ok today?” When asked if the superintendent is involved in day-to-day operations, she shared, “YES!” She also noted how the administrators' involvement contributes to building relationships with the students and staff.

Five participants addressed the support received from administration as a positive factor in working in a rural North Dakota school, with two of them explicitly acknowledging their superintendent. Additionally, the participant from Region 7 went on to say, “I like our

superintendent very much; he's the best principal we ever had; he's very dichotomous." This participant referred to a superintendent who was previously a principal in her district. Lastly, Participant T shared, "My principal listens to me, and she's so good and does so much for us."

Colleagues

Six of the seven participants mentioned their relationship with colleagues as a beneficial attribute of working in a rural school. The participant from Region 6 spoke fondly of the personal relationships with her colleagues by offering a great example of support. "If I know that I have a colleague who's going through something and they're having a tough day, I'll say, you know what... we can do reading buddies or play math games with our classes." This type of interaction occurs when an existing relationship is well established.

Participant S articulated her appreciation for a colleague by stating:

I was fortunate enough my first year of teaching to have a third-grade teacher who had been there quite a few years help me out, and she was just a world of wealth for me.

Now because of experience working here, I want to help people.

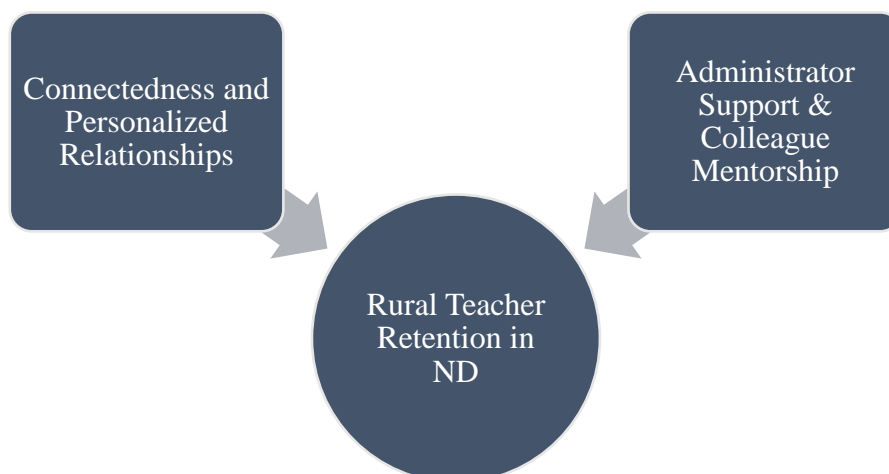
Sarmiento (2019) stated, "Some rural areas are hiring teachers from abroad through placement agencies, many of which are located in the Philippines. Today, over 500 public schools in at least 19 states have employed Filipino teachers on J-1 visas" (p. 1). Knowing the first-hand impact and value of mentorship, participant S noticed one of her colleagues, a new Filipino teacher hired by the participant's rural school, was struggling in the classroom. The participant verbalized to her superintendent the challenges this teacher was enduring and offering her a mentor might increase the likelihood of her staying in their rural school. Fortunately, the teacher was assigned a mentor and has finished her fourth year with the district with hopes of remaining in the small community.

In a related experience, Participant A revealed, “I have been blessed with some great mentor teachers, and now I am kind of the veteran teacher that people come to.” Two participants referenced the state mentor program, North Dakota Teacher Support System (NDTSS), and its impact on transitioning new teachers into the field. The novice teachers who participated in the program found a 10 percent higher retention rate than those who were not assigned a mentor through the state program (NDTSS, 2020). Participant A went on to explain that “when you intentionally put someone in that new person’s life, I think that helps them get through that first year, gives them encouragement, and there’s a better chance that they are going to stick with it.” This statement reflects the NDTSS’s program goals of offering personal support during the first year of teaching with the objective of retaining the novice teacher.

These two themes encompass the essence of the study by identifying positive factors that keep teachers in the rural classroom (see Figure 3). Although relationships and teacher support are two of the prominent themes that emerged from the study, teachers went on to identify some challenges or struggles they face in a rural school.

Figure 3

Rural North Dakota Teacher Retention Factors



Challenges in a Rural School

Each participant reported challenges associated with working in a rural school. The researcher felt the data related to rural school challenges was pertinent to the study and be included in the findings for this publication. It did not appear the difficulties reduced the persistence and retention of teachers. Although this may be true, Participant D acknowledged his desire to leave and consider a larger district; however, after looking at salary and housing costs in both communities, he did not pursue the position and remained in his rural school. Nevertheless, several disadvantages were disclosed during the seven interviews:

- **Isolation:** Many rural schools are isolated in proximity to a larger city, which some perceive negatively.
- **Staffing Challenges:** Some positions are hard-to-fill, forcing districts to find alternative avenues to securing staff.
- **Lack of Resources:** The resources identified by the participants include limited financial resources, counseling services, library resources, and technology.
- **Additional Duties:** Participants report wearing many hats, referring to assigned duties beyond their classroom teaching.

Discussion

Understanding the factors that influence teachers to become long-staying educators in rural schools is vital to explore. With the discouraging rates of teacher turnover and attrition, school administrators are caught in the repetitive pattern of filling vacancies within their schools. Although many studies focus on why teachers exit the career, this study intended to gather teachers' positive perceptions of working in a rural environment and why they chose to stay. The study's findings and recommendations can assist district administration and state

policymakers in implementing strategies to increase teacher retention in rural schools.

Collectively, the results and subsequent interpretations can prove beneficial to increasing teacher retention in rural areas.

Previous researchers have studied teacher retention, and the findings from this study align with similar results noted during an extensive literature review. Watts (2016) declares many teachers remain in rural areas because of administrator support, the opportunity to develop close relationships with students, and respect from the community. Two of Watts's findings, relationships and administrator support, parallel the themes identified in this study.

Although personal experiences define administrator support, the research reiterates some commonalities. The teachers who felt supported were also more likely to stay in the profession (Bland et al., 2014). Overall, educators are more satisfied with their career choice when empowered through administrative support (Anderson, 2014; Atwell, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006). There is a strong correlation between job satisfaction and teacher retention. Administrator support influences teacher retention when promoting a safe and well-managed school environment (Inman & Marlow, 2004). Undeniably, administrative support was an essential component found in this study and many previous studies.

Additionally, mentoring and induction programs benefit teachers transitioning into a new role. Mentoring helps teachers adjust to their school's expectations, helps foster self-confidence, and allows teachers to increase their knowledge-base and teaching skills (Lowe, 2006). New teacher induction and mentoring programs embedded in novice teacher training decrease teacher attrition and turnover (Portner, 2005; Wong, 2005). Unquestionably, these

programs set the foundation for educator success in the profession, increasing their likelihood of remaining.

Retaining quality teachers is an avenue to building an institution of excellence, a priority for school districts. Educational leaders will benefit from this qualitative study as they implement similar strategies to increase teacher retention while improving student achievement and providing instructional distinction.

Implications for Social Change and Researcher Reflections

Teacher attrition and turnover are costly, time-consuming for administrators, and most importantly, impact student achievement. This study was designed to identify the factors that increase teacher retention in rural areas. The outcomes of this study offer recommendations to district leaders on creating environments that increase teacher retention rates.

The results postulate that building strong relationships is a critical factor in teacher satisfaction, leading to longevity. The researcher feels deliberate professional development on building relationships is critical to teacher satisfaction and longevity, as noted by the participants of this study. According to Pianta and Allen (2018), “teachers do not get nearly enough training on how to build strong relationships and be a champion for their students” (p. 1). Professional development comes in many forms, such as a book study, an individual course, a single-session workshop, or a seminar. Administrators should offer professional development opportunities to all staff, not just new hires (see Table 3). A healthy school culture is built through intentional actions, such as establishing school norms, celebrating achievements (both students and staff), consistent discipline, and engaging families/parents. Purposefully planned activities that foster relationships between staff, students, and families are imperative to developing quintessential relationships. These activities may include

professional development in social-emotional learning, understanding poverty, and supporting multicultural populations.

Another recommendation (see Table 3) to increase retention is to assign all first-year teachers or those new to the district a teacher mentor from the same school. Mentorship supports teachers during the transition period while building a relationship simultaneously. Participants in this study affirmed the significance of a mentor during a teacher’s early career. According to recent research by Shockley (2021), teachers in North Dakota assigned a mentor were 10 percent more likely to return the following year. This statistic denotes the positive impact of colleague mentorship, especially during the first year, and its implication for longevity.

Table 3

Table of Recommended Actions

Recommendations	Responsible Party
Offer targeted professional development opportunities to support building relationships	Principal and Superintendent
Teachers are assigned a mentor during their first year with the district	Principal and Mentor Teachers

Note: *Recommendations for Action with Responsible Parties*

This study confirms that teachers value strongly their personalized relationships with students, families, and colleagues. Secondly, they find the support they receive from their administration and colleagues as a retention factor. As a result of this study, the researcher gleaned essential outcomes pertinent to her organization. Although every research finding holds value, the discovery most relevant to the researcher is the merit of relationships and connectedness in the educational workplace. Given that all participants associated the

importance of relationships to career satisfaction, the researcher strives to ensure a culture substantiated by positive relationships exists in the school she leads.

The researcher finds the benefit of a workplace environment that encourages connection and a culture that values and fosters relationships. However, no specific factor guarantees teacher retention; instead, a combination of several appears most effective to increase teacher retention. A district should never limit itself to a one-size-fits-all method for retaining teachers, as it would be a disservice to the diverse needs of each distinctive school. In summary, teacher retention is an interwoven construct that impacts a school and its constituents, most notably the students.

References

- Anderson, W. H. (2014). *A qualitative study of novice teacher retention in two rural Midwest schools* [Doctoral dissertation, Wichita State University].
- Atwell, N. S. (2008). *Retention of teachers in rural Kentucky*. Western Kentucky University.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED503024.pdf>
- Bland, P., Church, E., & Luo, M. (2014). Strategies for attracting and retaining teachers. *Administrative Issues Journal, Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(1).
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among the five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1984). *Beyond the commission reports. The coming crisis in teaching*. Rand Corp. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED248245.pdf>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 6–13.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Berry, B. (2006). Highly qualified teachers for all. *Educational Leadership*, 64(3), 14–20.
- Giorgi, A. (1976). Phenomenology and the foundations of psychology. In J. K. Cole & W. J. Arnold (Eds.), *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation 1975: Conceptual Foundations of Psychology*. University of Nebraska Press.

- Huberman, M. A. (1989). The professional life cycle of teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 91(1), 31–57.
- Ingersoll, R. (2001). Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: An organizational analysis. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 499–534.
https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1093&context=gse_pubs
- Ingersoll, R., & Smith, T. M. (2004). *Do teacher induction and mentoring matter?* GSE Publications.
https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1134&context=gse_pubs
- Jung, J. A. (2021). *Positive influences on why they stay: A qualitative study on the contributing factors to teacher retention in rural North Dakota* [Doctoral dissertation, Minnesota State University Moorhead]. <https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis/579/>
- Inman, D., & Marlow, L. (2004). Teacher retention: Why do beginning teachers remain in the profession. *Education*, 124(4), 605–614.
- Kakkori, L. (2009). Hermeneutics and phenomenology problems when applying hermeneutic phenomenological method in educational qualitative research. *The Journal of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society*, 18(2), 19–27.
- Langdrige, D. (2017). Phenomenology. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Social Psychology* (pp. 165–183). Palgrave Macmillian.
<http://oro.open.ac.uk/45882/3/45882.pdf>
- Lowe, J. M. (2006). Rural education: Attracting and retaining teachers in small schools. *The Rural Educator*, 27(2), 28–32.

- Maranto, R., & Shuls, J. V. (2012). How do we get them on the farm? Efforts to improve rural teacher recruitment and retention in Arkansas. *The Rural Educator*, 34(1), 9.
<https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v34i1.406>
- Pianta, R., & Allen, J. (2018, Mar. 8). *Training teachers in relationship building is key to any school discipline reform*. Education Post. <https://educationpost.org/training-teachers-in-relationship-building-is-key-to-any-school-discipline-reform/>
- Portner, H. (2005). Success for new teachers. *American School Board Journal*, 30–33.
- Richardson, V. (2003). Constructivist pedagogy. *Teachers College Record*, 105(9), 1623–1640.
- Sargeant, J. (2012). Qualitative research part II: Participants, analysis, and quality assurance. *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 4(1), 1–3.
- Sarmiento, A. (2019, December 5). *Green cards for Filipino teacher the answer to U.S. shortage?* Inquirer.net. <https://usa.inquirer.net/49081/green-cards-for-filipino-teachers-the-answer-to-u-s-shortage>
- Shockley, E. (2020). *North Dakota's teacher shortage illuminated by continued k-12 university system collaboration*. <https://doi.org/https://ndus.edu/2020/01/15/teacher-shortage/>
- Steffy, B. E., & Wolfe, M. P. (2001). *A life-cycle model for career teachers*. Kappa Delta Pi Record. https://doi.org/200110/ai_n8962972/
- Stronge, J. H., & Hindman, J. L. (2003). Hiring the best teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 48–52.
http://www.educationleader.com/subtopicintro/read/ASCD/ASCD_230_1.pdf

- Sutcher, L., Darling-Hammond, L., & Carver-Thomas, D. (2019). Understanding teacher shortages: An analysis of teacher supply and demand in the United States. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27, 35. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3696>
- Thomas, A., Menon, A., Boruff, J., Rodriguez, A. M., & Ahmed, S. (2014). Applications of social constructivist learning theories in knowledge translation for healthcare professionals: A scoping review. *Implementation Science*, 9(54), 1–20.
- Ulferts, J. (2016). A brief summary of teacher recruitment and retention in the smallest Illinois rural schools. *The Rural Educator*, 37(1), 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v37i1.292>
- Varathan, P. (2018). *The U.S. is having a hard time keeping teachers in their jobs*. The Learning Policy Institute. <https://qz.com/1284903/american-teachers-leave-their-jobs-at-higher-rates-than-other-countries>
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Walker, C. (2015). Social constructionism and qualitative research. *The Journal of Theory Construction & Testing*, 19(2), 37.
- Watts, J. D. (2016). *An exploration of teacher retention in rural school districts in Eastern Kentucky* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Kentucky]. https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=edsc_etds
- Wong, H. (2005). *Teacher mentoring and induction: The state of the art and beyond*. Corwin Press.