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

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving and encouraging husband, Greg, and our supportive children, Landen, Ireland, and Aiden. Lastly, our sweet Shih Tzu, Samson, who sat beside me during every marathon writing session.

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I would like to acknowledge the support I received along my doctoral journey. First and foremost, I could not have stayed the course without my faith and ever-loving guidance and faithfulness of Jesus. I found my strength in Him when I could not find it in myself. Next, my family and their encouragement from the beginning. From submitting my application to my final dissertation submission, my husband and children have been my ultimate cheerleaders, counselors, thesauruses, and foundations of inspiration. Without their sacrifices, this dream of completing my doctoral degree would never have been possible. No words can ever fully describe my gratitude.

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Abstract

An alarming number of educators are leaving the field within the first five years of employment. Midwestern rural schools experience a slightly higher percentage of turnover than do their urban counterparts. Due to this shortage of teachers, many districts across the nation have employed strategies to recruit and retain competent teachers. This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach seeking to identify common themes among teachers who are long-staying teachers in a rural district (those with 1000 or fewer students). Both the social constructivism and teacher career cycle theoretical frameworks have been utilized to support the researcher's understanding of rural teachers' feelings, perceptions, and experiences. Between five and eight rural teachers with no less than five years of experience will be selected from several regions across the state of North Dakota.

Keywords: teacher retention, rural teachers, Midwest, North Dakota, qualitative

Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

Many schools across the nation are encountering 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. Some rural schools, specifically in North Dakota, struggle to fill the growing vacancies with highly qualified teachers.

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). Researchers, Boylan and Ulferts, conducted several studies identifying the factors associated with rural teacher retention.

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 to student achievement (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004; Ulferts, 2016). Regardless of their geographical location, students deserve quality educators that establish a school atmosphere that promotes high student achievement.

Why care about small, rural districts where student and staff numbers are much lower than urban areas? Rural districts make up more than 50 percent of all schools in the United States, with approximately 25 percent of the nation's students (Lemke, 2010; Provasnik et al.,

2007). With one-quarter of the country's youth educated in rural districts, it is an important topic

to research. Rural students warrant equal educational opportunities as their urban counterparts.

Rural, Midwest schools experience a 9.6 percent turnover rate, which is slightly higher

than the 8 percent nationwide average (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The

existing shortage is why many researchers have studied the high attrition rates across the United

States and regionally, as noted above. One factor that has impacted the shortage is the

implementation of federal policy. The No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB) mandate prompted

schools to actively recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. According to NCLB policy, all

teachers needed to be highly skilled in their area of expertise by the year 2015-2016. This

directive contributed to the shortage of teachers in the special education field (Lemke, 2010) and

both mathematics and science (Sutcher et al., 2019). The federal requirement created a burden

for many rural districts as many of their educators did not meet the highly qualified standards

(Gagnon, 2016; Goodpaster et al., 2012; Sindelar et al., 2007). This policy stimulated several

research studies between the years 2007-2012, which indicated the challenges faced by districts

during the time of NCLB.

In response to the shortage, schools across the nation employed strategies to recruit

competent and highly qualified teachers that contribute to student learning. Ingersoll (2001)

states, "Contemporary educational theory holds that one of the pivotal causes of inadequate

school performance is the inability of schools to adequately staff classrooms with quality

teachers" (p.12). However, finding these educators has proven to be a challenge for some rural

areas; therefore, the focus should remain on what factors lead to the retention of teachers. In

2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced NCLB. There is promise that the ESSA

requirements will allow more flexibility to make state decisions, which should benefit a large number of rural districts, including those in the state of North Dakota.

An abundance of literature exists on the challenges of the mounting teacher shortage. Most recently, Sutcher 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 (Sutcher et al., 2019). Teachers who feel satisfied in their current teaching situation are more likely to stay, regardless of the district's population.

Another study by Eppley (2015) indicated that relationships in the rural community are essential to all stakeholders. The elders in the community believe the school is the binding agent that makes a community (Eppley, 2015). School also becomes the social center for rural communities, where the school hosts sporting events, school plays, and common gatherings. This social context of community connection is noted as a factor in teacher retention. In Eppley's (2015) study, the participants' responses collected through semi-structured interviews reiterated the intertwined nature of the community and the school. This research is important to the entire body of literature on retention, but specifically to rural teacher retention.

Researcher Watts (2016) explored the reasons experienced teachers (those who have been in the field for five or more years) remain in a rural area. The findings include three themes that emerged from the interviews: professional support, the impact of school culture, and conditions outside of school (Watts, 2016). The professional relationships that exist within a school are conditions of teacher retention, which include individuals from the administrative team, a teacher's colleagues, and the students' parents (Watts, 2016).

Although rural districts struggle to recruit teachers, the retention of teachers is equally as problematic; however, some individuals choose to stay. Elfers et al. (2006) attempted to identify the school characteristics that relate to the retention of teachers, such as the level of student poverty, percentage of minority students, percentage of English as a Second Language (ESL) students served, and student performance. These school characteristics are important to consider when evaluating the reasons teachers remain employed in a rural district (Wynn et al., 2007). In addition, Wynn and colleagues (2007) found that beginning teachers are more likely to remain in education if they feel satisfied with their principal's leadership and support. This research finding is valuable to practicing principals and the impact of their leadership skills on increasing teacher retention.

Teacher retention is a topic addressed at the local, state, and federal levels as leaders seek to implement policy and programs to increase the likelihood teachers will remain in the field. Researcher Richard Ingersoll contributes to the literature related to teacher retention. His work includes data on teachers who often score higher on the SAT, national teacher exam, and teacher certification tests are among those who are leaving (Ingersoll, 2006). Unfortunately, it seems those with the most promise have higher exodus rates (Villani, 2009). This high attrition rate is distressing for many districts, as it burdens leaders with a continuous cycle of hiring and training new educators. According to Sutcher et al. (2019), implementing interventions to reduce the rate of attrition will balance the supply and demand construct of the teacher shortage.

The literature related to teacher retention in rural North Dakota is nearly non-existent. Reports and studies conducted reflect the rising teacher shortage with little mention of the motivational desires for teachers to remain in the profession. The researcher's passion for

improving education in North Dakota inspired this study. The research investigates the factors that contribute to the successful retention of experienced teachers in rural North Dakota schools.

Theoretical Frameworks

Social Constructivism

This study integrates Vygotsky's social constructivism paradigm. 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, common themes often emerge to help the researcher better understand the phenomenon under study.

The theory of social constructivism, also known as social constructionism, originated from Vygotsky's work (1978), directs and influences this research project. 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. 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 aligns well with this research study as participants interviewed will provide 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)

Furthermore, social constructivism is based on three general assumptions: reality, knowledge, and learning. Reality is constructed through human interactions and experiences. Knowledge develops when an individual begins to make meaning of their experiences. Finally, learning is shaped by external activities and the interaction between individuals (Beaumie, 2006). The dialogue between the researcher and the participants reveals knowledge within the context of problems to be discussed and solved (Adams, 2006).

Teacher Career Cycle

In addition to social constructivism, two models of the teacher career cycle (see Table 1) will be applied to this research. Steffy and Wolfe (2001) characterize six phases of development that begin with novice status and complete the cycle with retirement. For this research, teachers practicing in the professional teacher phase, signifying several years of experience in the field, will be interviewed. 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). For this study, teachers practicing in their mid-career or late-career phase will be selected as participants.

With the knowledge that nearly 50 percent of teachers leave the profession within the first five years, teachers identified as long-staying (five or more years of service in a rural

district) will be chosen for interviews. Selecting educators who have surpassed their novice years

will provide a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to their longevity in a rural North

Dakota school. Personal, organizational, and professional factors will be explored throughout the

interview processes.

Table 1

Comparison of Two Teacher Life Cycle Models

Steffy and Wolfe's Model	Huberman's Model
1. Novice Teacher	1. Novice
2. Apprentice Teacher	
3. Professional Teacher	2. Mid-Career
4. Expert Teacher	
5. Distinguished Teacher	3. Late-Career
6. Emeritus Teacher (Active retired teacher)	

Note: Comparison of the two teacher life cycle models taken from White (2008).

Need for the Study

With close to half of all teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, the

teacher shortage across the nation is a cause for concern, and rural schools are not immune.

There is a wealth of literature related to the retention of teachers; however, the literature lacks

specificity to the rural areas of North Dakota. This study seeks to fill the literature gap by

examining the factors that contribute to the retention of rural teachers from several regions in the

state of North Dakota. The research is anticipated to provide district leaders with the insight

needed to retain highly effective teachers in their rural schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine experienced teachers' feelings and perceptions associated with continued employment in a rural North Dakota school district. This study is designed to identify the factors that lead some educators to continue practicing in the field despite the high exodus rates by many. The phenomenological qualitative research includes interviews with a concentrated focus on identifying common themes between the participants' shared experiences in a rural environment.

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, which negatively impacts student learning (Varathan, 2018). Identifying the reasons experienced teachers remain in rural schools will prove beneficial to district leaders as they implement strategies to retain the quality teachers already employed in their schools.

The existing literature suggests some teachers remain employed in a rural district despite the labeled drawbacks recognized by other researchers. According to Boylan and McSwan (1998) and Lemke (2010), job satisfaction is higher in rural communities with factors of small class size, opportunities for individualized instruction, fewer behavioral problems, and building solid relationships with staff and students. One commonality among the studies evaluated thus far is the overwhelming need to uncover additional strategies to retain teachers. This study may yield generalizable data representative of rural environments in other states and be deemed valuable beyond North Dakota borders.

Significance of the Study

Teacher turnover is very costly to districts which can become financially burdensome if occurring frequently. Holdheide and Lachlan-Hache (2019) report that teacher replacement can cost districts from $17,000 to $22,000 per educator. The savings from just one retained teacher could be utilized on additional resources to help support the mission and vision of the school. Teacher attrition is higher in rural schools, those receiving federal Title I funding, and schools with a high population of low-income families (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2002). Given that over half of North Dakota schools are identified as Title I schools (ND Insights, 2020), the findings in this study can guide leadership practices in schools funded partially through federal monies or any school seeking an increase in teacher retention strategies.

The researcher's first-hand experience with teacher turnover has made an impact on district decision-making practices. Year after year, the rural vacancies created challenges as several positions remained unfilled, which fueled the desire to find a solution to the problem. The 'revolving door' associated with teacher attrition created 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).

Retaining quality teachers is one stepping-stone to building an institution of excellence. Unfortunately, many rural schools in the state of North Dakota experience a high rate of teacher turnover. Educational leaders across the state will benefit from this research project as the knowledge gleaned can be applied to rural districts across the state. In the future, this project might lead to further research on one specific factor that contributes to teacher retention. That is to say, if the researcher uncovers one homogeneous factor that all rural educators share, it might

prove advantageous to conduct further research on one component providing a more detailed understanding of that one construct. The extensive research conducted through this study will set a solid foundation for future research and scholarly writing on the topic.

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?

Research Design

The interpretive framework that aligns with this research study follows the social constructivist viewpoint. Creswell and Poth (2018) state the constructivist worldview is found in phenomenological studies where individuals describe their experiences. With this viewpoint, there is no single reality but rather multiple realities that will surface throughout the research process.

Using a phenomenological approach allows the participants to express the perception of their experiences as a teacher in a rural school. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the researcher must listen carefully to what the participants are saying or describing about their life experiences. The utilization of a hermeneutical phenomenology approach, which focuses on the lived experiences, as well as interpreting the participants' responses, is relevant to this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, applying the social constructionist framework to the research is an appropriate approach to gain information about the phenomenological factors that contribute to the retention of teachers in rural districts, specifically in North Dakota.

Employment of a qualitative methodological perspective blended with semi-structured interviews guides this research study. This approach is defined as "A common meaning for

several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). The individuals interviewed will represent rural communities across the state rather than from just one or two regions.

Assumptions and Limitations

Several assumptions are situated throughout this phenomenological qualitative research. From an ontological perspective, the research includes examining the reality of teachers who remain employed in a rural school. The assumption is that all participants express honest realities that exist in their environment without providing biased or untrue responses. From an epistemological perspective, the study assumes the researcher and participants influence each other equally during the interview process, and realities will be constructed based on the dialogue between the two. Even though the researcher will make every effort to comprehend and fully understand the participants' responses and realities, the researcher's personal knowledge and experiences shape the interpretation of those realities.

The researcher's positionality brings an understanding of rural education and administrative experience of hiring new staff and supporting an environment that increases teacher retention. Creswell and Poth (2018) share that researchers often position themselves in the study by acknowledging their background and how it informs their interpretation of the findings. The researcher is also mindful that teacher responses are independent of one another, and each participant's responses are unique to their experiences.

One final assumption related to this study is the utilization of two teacher career cycle models as a guide for choosing participants. The researcher feels selecting teachers who have several years of experience will provide an accurate insight into their reality of working in a rural school. Choosing seasoned participants from all regions of the state will also provide a

representative sample of teachers and the circumstances that led them to continue their education careers in rural North Dakota.

A couple of limitations are noted within the study. The first limitation is the small sample size. As with any qualitative research, due to the nature of in-depth written expression of the participant's feelings and experiences, it is possible the participants chosen may not represent the whole. It is also conceivable the experiences of those interviewed will not represent those experiences and feelings of teachers outside of North Dakota, narrowing the generalizability.

Another limitation is the variance between participants' experiences. Participants will represent different regions of the state, thus acknowledging their experiences will be shaped by their environment, including geographic location, community size, and the leadership style of their administrators. There is no way to equate the responses based on each participant's unique experience; however, the researcher will interpret the responses for common themes. Just as the researcher's background knowledge and experiences influence the interpretation of the responses, the participants' background knowledge and experiences will define their reality.

Definition of Terms

Administrator: A school administration is a term used to describe leaders in a school, such as a principal, vice-principal, or other school leaders in an official capacity. According to Craig (2018), a school administrator "identifies and articulates a school's mission and goals and makes them happen by implementing programs, delegating tasks and allocating resources.

Attrition. Attrition refers to the changes in teacher status from year to year, including teachers who exit the field altogether or those who change fields within the profession (Boe et al., 1998).

Leadership. Leadership refers to one or more individuals with a vision of change and inspires

followers to share in their vision (Grimm, 2010).

Rural. According to the USDA (2007), rural states are defined by three combined constructs:

Census population numbers, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and Rural-Urban

Commuting Areas (RUCA). The term rural is characterized in this study by a North

Dakota school district with less than 1000 students.

Teacher retention. Teacher retention is defined as those educators who stay in the same school

from one year to the next (Lochmiller et al., 2016).

Teacher turnover. Teacher turnover refers to the "change in teachers from one year to the next

in a particular school setting" (Sorenson & Ladd, 2018, p.1).

Summary

With high numbers of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years of

entering the field, it is imperative that schools identify strategies to retain their experienced

teachers. Rural districts often experience a 'revolving door' where certified teachers leave at

higher rates than urban districts, which creates a financial burden and fills classrooms with

inexperienced or unqualified teachers.

Chapter One establishes a brief understanding of rural teacher retention and its impact on

rural school districts. Two theoretical frameworks guide this research study while acknowledging

several assumptions and limitations. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive, scholarly review of

the literature related to teacher retention challenges and substantiated retention strategies.

Chapter Three describes the research methodology applied to this phenomenological qualitative

study. Chapters Four and Five outline the findings, conclusions, and further research

opportunities.

This research will contribute to and enhance the current literature that already exists on this topic. In addition, it will help fill the gap of existing research related to rural North Dakota teacher retention. Due to the mounting teacher shortage, additional research on the topic is necessary to promote the strategies associated with retaining teachers in rural areas. The study will provide district leadership the insight needed to retain experienced, highly effective teachers in their rural schools.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Some researchers argue that teacher shortages are not the result of limited teacher candidates but rather too many educators leaving the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) declare that teachers' national attrition rate is 8% annually, whereas high-achieving countries like Finland and Singapore hover around the 3-4% range. This increased rate of attrition in the United States posits countless challenges for school districts nationwide. Recruitment strategies have been the heart of many research studies; however, retention factors should hold similar value. Teacher retention plays a critical role in the teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). This chapter examines the literature related to rural teacher retention, both nationally and specifically to North Dakota.

Methods of Searching

Several methods of searching were employed during the research process. The MSUM Livingston Lord Library generated much of the literature related to the study. A combination of keywords produced multiple resources. The research began with broad descriptors, such as 'retention of rural teachers' and 'recruitment and retention of rural teachers.' When over 20,000 articles appeared, parameters were set to narrow the scholarly research to peer-reviewed articles and used the advanced search option, which provided more focused results that were pertinent to this study. This strategy alone reduced the number by half. The databases frequently utilized to gather data include Academic Search Premier, ERIC (EBSCO), Research Gate, PennGSE, and Google Scholar. Occasionally, an article was unavailable, whereby the researcher requested the document through the MSUM library. Fortunately, the librarians were able to retrieve the studies at no cost.

Adopting a method of organization was crucial at the onset of research. The researcher espoused a technique of coding articles with notes related to a relevant topic within the document. For example, if an article contained information on the teacher shortage in rural areas, that data would be recorded that on a sticky note for future reference. This method seems a bit archaic in our technological world; however, the strategy of using paper copies and making notes complimented the researcher's learning style.

A comprehensive literature review contributes to the research process and lays the groundwork for an extensive study. The collection of literature has grown and expanded throughout the research process. After several semesters of delving into peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, reports, and books, a consistent discovery of multiple citations from the same authors appeared across many studies. This finding confirmed the researcher was on the right path to reach saturation points within the research.

Theoretical Orientation for the Study

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. The qualitative research study integrates these theoretical frameworks throughout the research process. Utilizing two theoretical constructs drives the researcher's understanding of the complex nature of teacher retention.

Social Constructivism

The theoretical perspective adopted for this study follows Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. His theory holds that all cognitive functions result from social and cultural interactions within one's society (Vygotsky, 1978). This viewpoint believes that ideas are constructed through interaction with others (Powell & Kalina, 2009). According to Jackson

(2010), knowledge is characterized by mental models or beliefs people use to interpret events and actions in their surroundings. What is real and experienced for one person may not be the same for another with the same interaction. Jackson (2010) goes on to explain that typification frameworks help individuals interpret and make sense of others' actions and the physical world in which they reside.

By design, humans interact with one another in their environment, allowing them to gain knowledge and experiences from their social surroundings to understand the world. Liu and Matthews (2005) describe consciousness as an individual's ability to meaningfully perceive their immediate surroundings rather than knowing all ontological answers to the universe. A person's behaviors and actions influence one's perceptions of their social environment. Specific to this study, participants interviewed will reveal their lived experiences of working in a rural school. These lived experiences and social interactions may differ based on the social construct in which they are living. Detel (2001) defines social constructivism as an intentionalist program of social ontology trying to clarify how social entities like social groups and institutions are composed.

Work conditions are a primary factor in teacher retention, and those conditions are a direct reflection of the social environment that exists in the school. This theory aligns with other's research as this study seeks to understand a social phenomenon amongst a culture of educators: long-staying, rural teachers. As stated in Chapter One, there are three assumptions associated with social constructivism: reality, knowledge, and learning. For the purposes of this study, both reality and knowledge are the assumptions guiding the research. A rural teacher's reality establishes the structure for constructing knowledge, which ultimately affects their career choices.

Teacher Career Cycle

In all occupations, individuals circulate through a career cycle; however, educators are stepping away at a higher rate than other careers (Ingersoll, 2001). For some, this cycle is short, yet for others, the cycle takes an individual from novice to an expert in their field, which may span decades. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), teachers' attrition rates hold steady around the 16% mark (Wang, 2019). Nursing, a similar, female-dominated occupation, experiences much lower attrition rates (Ingersoll, 2001). This comparison validates the critical nature of additional scholarly research on factors that lead to increased teacher retention.

For those who choose to exit the profession prematurely, nearly half do so within the first five years of employment (Ingersoll, 2001). For this reason, the researcher is interviewing mid-career or late-career teachers to acquire data that represents long-staying teachers. Huberman's (1989) and Steffy and Wolfe's (2001) teacher career cycles guide this study as a beginning teacher's experiences are incomparable to those of an experienced teacher. According to these career models, the phases indicate different levels of effectiveness, confidence, and professional knowledge that impact their classroom experiences.

More than one researcher coined the term 'survival' when referring to a novice teacher's first couple of years (Bevan, 2004; Huberman, 1989). Many new teachers face demanding responsibilities that exceed their developing skillset creating stressful work conditions. Veteran colleagues are often called upon as mentors to support and guide the emergent educator. Their pedagogical expertise and effective communication skills (Cothran et al., 2008) can provide novice teachers with the foundation needed to establish confidence in their efficacy as a teacher. Consequently, research participants for this study must complete a minimum of five years of

teaching in a classroom setting. Finally, Figure 1 represents how the theory of social

constructivism and the teacher career cycle form the theoretical framework guiding this study on

rural teacher retention.

Figure 1

Theoretical Frameworks Influencing Teacher Retention
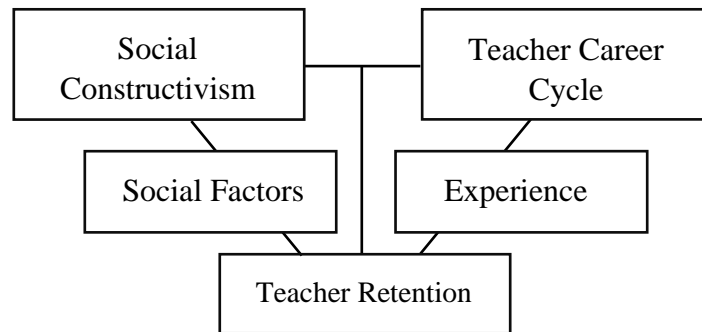
Review of Literature

Introduction

  The teacher shortage has garnered attention over several decades (Rockoff, 2004; Taylor,

2013), prompting various research studies on the importance of recruiting and retaining teachers

(Beesley et al., 2008; Jacobsen, 2013). Approximately a third of novice teachers leave the

profession within the first three years, and a more staggering statistic finds almost one-half of the

professionals leave within the first five years of employment (Barnes et al., 2007; Ingersoll,

2001). This imbalance within the educational realm has prompted many districts to implement

recruitment and retention strategies when filling open positions (Beesley et al., 2008).

  Although recruitment strategies are notable and important to district leaders, retention

efforts are essential to address the teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019)

in urban and rural environments. However, scholars conclude that rural teacher retention is more

problematic than urban teacher retention (Davis, 2002; Goodpaster et al., 2012; Hammer et al., 2005; Monk, 2007). For this reason, rural areas are more susceptible to staffing challenges (Bland et al., 2014; Davis, 2002; Ingersoll, 2003; Latterman & Steffes, 2017; Taie & Goldring, 2017), resulting in very few, if any, qualified candidates (Jimerson, 2003). In response to this trend, policymakers have addressed the teacher shortage by executing various recruitment strategies; however, they must amalgamate those efforts with the identified retention factors to decrease the deficit. Rather than focusing on short-term recruitment strategies, such as sign-on bonuses, loan forgiveness, or housing incentives, district administrators should substantiate the conditions that lead to teacher retention in their unique, rural district.

Many researchers have studied recruitment and retention in rural America. Sher (1983) maintained that rural districts struggle to secure and retain qualified teachers due to the function of the three C's: characteristics, conditions, and compensation. As Sher (1983) explained, characteristics refer to an individual's background experiences and personal qualities that attract them to a rural community. Conditions, the second function, refers to the rural environment's attraction by the individual seeking employment. Finally, compensation includes a salary as well as incentives for working in a rural community. Although decades old, this theory still holds true according to more recent literature (Harmon, 2001). Rural communities often have inadequate resources resulting in lower salaries and more unsatisfactory working conditions (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Weisbaum & Huang, 2001), thus leaving rural schools with unequal opportunities compared to their urban peers.

Scholars have studied the teacher shortage to determine its effect on school districts in America. More recently, Sutcher et al. (2016) examine the current trends in teacher supply and demand, analyze the severity of the labor market imbalance, and investigate what is likely

driving the teacher shortages across the nation. Embedded in the empirical research lies well-intended federal policy; however, these mandates created hardships for many rural districts. To better understand how to counteract the imbalance of rural teacher vacancies, substantial research has been devoted to recruiting and retaining teachers. The literature review outlines the advantages and disadvantages of rural employment, along with the significance of teacher retention on student achievement. In addition, several factors influence longevity in the classroom, including salary, administrative support, induction/mentoring programs, and working conditions. Teachers are the nucleus of a school, and without them, rural students will not receive the educational opportunities they deserve.

Characteristics of Rural Communities

The definition of 'rural' comes in various forms. The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as "what is not urban – that is, after defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p. 1). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) offers a more detailed definition using three levels of rural classification:

1. Fringe Census-defined rural territory that is less than equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

2. Distant Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

3. Remote Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (Provasnik et al., 2007, p. 122).

The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as a community with a population of fewer than 2500

residents (Barton, 2012). Monk (2007) explains that many rural communities are small, with

sparse settlements, and often have an economic reliance on agricultural industries. He also notes

that many have limited medical services or shopping options (Monk, 2007). It would be unfair to

categorize all rural communities the same as they vary widely within states and across regions.

The context for this study will include participants from the distant and remote rural definitions

as identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007). Also, most rural

communities in North Dakota fit into the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of rural.

Teacher Retention on Student Achievement

Many determinants influence student achievement; however, teacher effectiveness ranks

as one of the most significant (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Rivkin et al., 2005; Rockoff, 2004, Shuls

& Maranto, 2014; Ulferts, 2016). Without it, schools lack a comprehensive instructional model

to support diverse learners adequately. Teacher effectiveness encompasses many facets of

pedagogy; likewise, classroom experience also links to improved outcomes (Bellwether

Education Partners, 2016). Therefore, the retention of experienced teachers is paramount to

student achievement.

To address this issue, district leaders must evaluate their retention practices and the

efficacy of those approaches. Research supports teacher turnover and attrition (indicators of a

teacher shortage) as negatively affecting students and their achievement (Castro et al., 2018;

Ronfeldt et al., 2011). Teacher turnover disrupts school cohesion, and if repeated, this turnover

"thwarts the kind of continuity needed to build sustained, trustful relationships among teachers,

students, and families" (Castro et al., 2018 p. 3). From an organizational perspective, turnover of

ineffective employees is not all bad; however, in the educational realm, turnover often results in more inexperienced teachers entering classrooms, thus creating instability within the school.

From 1985 to 2009, North Dakota teacher retention for the first three years of an educator's career declined from 73 percent to 53 percent, respectively (Kan, 2014). This statistic illustrates the demand for teachers in the state. What spurred the rapid decline in teachers leaving the field? The research indicates several influential factors contributing to the downturn, yet many researchers will claim federal policy as a significant factor in the shortage.

Federal Policy

No Child Left Behind

Although policies are intended to improve education for all children in the United States, educators in rural areas often feel these policies do not account for the complexities of rural education. In a study conducted by Johnson et al. (2014), 80 percent of superintendents surveyed agreed that education policies are designed with urban or suburban districts in mind that are not always applicable to rural communities. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 prompted school districts to increase levels of accountability for student achievement (Jacobsen, 2013) by ensuring every student is taught by highly qualified teachers. One mandate of NCLB affecting schools across the nation was the requirement that all teachers meet professional requirements at every grade level and in every core content area (Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006). Although the federal policy had favorable intentions, the NCLB Act demanded accountability from schools while inadvertently impacting teachers (Bradbury, 2020). Unfortunately, this provision labeled many effective, accomplished teachers as unqualified (Darling-Hammond & Berry, 2006); therefore, they were unable to teach specific classes unless they could successfully pass a content-level assessment or take additional course work (U.S. Department of Education,

2009). It is not uncommon for educators in rural districts to teach several different courses, whereas teachers in urban schools may teach the same course multiple times per day. This difference poses challenges for rural teachers to meet certification guidelines in several areas. Advocates for rural education noted this requirement increased the competitive disadvantage for hard-to-staff and low-resource rural schools (Jimerson, 2003; Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004). Sadly, not one state met the deadline for employing highly qualified teachers (Spradlin & Prendergast, 2006), reiterating the difficulties of hiring teachers with the appropriate certifications.

NCLB requirements directly impacted rural districts, and without the assistance from federal and state policymakers, NCLB compliance would prove difficult. Rural school advocates reaffirm how NCLB mandates created hurdles for many rural districts when teachers could not secure the suggested certification to teach courses for which they no longer qualify. Research related to NCLB also reveals teachers faced challenges to meet federal and state accountability standards while providing academic opportunities for all students (Taylor, 2013).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Noting the many challenges amidst NCLB, policymakers determined the need for a reformed policy to satisfy the recognizable differences between states. The most recent policy to change education in America is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed by President Obama in 2015. ESSA primarily reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 with additional provisions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). ESSA requires annual reporting of student progress to all stakeholders (parents, school and district administrators, state superintendent of education, and policymakers), support for states and districts toward school improvement while reducing assessment mandates, and providing

educational opportunities for all students. State decision-making opens the door for a renewed

focus on innovation and flexibility (Gagnon, 2016). ESSA gives schools and districts broad

flexibility in the turnaround approach they select. However, it requires that those efforts meet

federal regulations for what is considered 'evidence-based' and must be designed with input

from families and community members (Blad, 2019). The plan must include community input

before finalization, which is essential considering over a quarter of the school-age children in the

U.S. receive their education in a rural environment. The ESSA policy encourages states to embed

personalized learning into their practices to ensure all students' learning differences are met. One

critical component of ESSA that impacts rural areas is preserving the Rural Education

Achievement Program (REAP). The program provides resources to assist with recruiting,

developing, and retaining teachers in rural schools (Mahoney, 2016) by permitting the movement

of federal monies between Title programs to support each state's unique issues.

The Value of Rural Schools

Why care about small, rural districts where student and staff numbers are much lower

than urban areas? Rural districts make up more than 50 percent of all schools in the United

States, educating approximately one-quarter of the nation's youth (Barton, 2012; Gagnon, 2016;

Lemke; 2010; Provasnik et al., 2007). Specifically, 37.5 percent of North Dakota youth are

educated in rural districts (Barton, 2012). Educational programming in rural areas brings about

challenges that many urban school districts do not face. Rural schools face staffing challenges

associated with a limited local teacher supply, lack of professional development and certification

options, and geographic and social isolation (Aragon, 2016). To counter this issue, rural schools

often employ more novice or inexperienced teachers (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2014), where remote

areas and rural districts employ 9.8 and 9.7 percent, respectively, more beginning teachers than

the national average (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012). As noted previously, novice teachers do not

possess the same skill set as established teachers; therefore, the students they serve will be at a

disadvantage.

Advantages/Disadvantages

Rural educators note there are several advantages to working in a rural school district.

Scholars agree that teachers report greater opportunities for one-on-one instruction, teacher

autonomy, smaller class sizes, and fewer behavioral challenges (Kearney, 1994; Monk, 2007;

Osterholm et al., 2006). 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. Teachers also choose rural areas as a lifestyle choice (Boylan & Alstor,

1993; Davis, 2002), where they experience a sense of community, which begins in the school.

Rural schools are considered the community's social heart, and teachers are given special status

(Osterholm et al., 2006). For these reasons, some teachers are willing to overlook the

disadvantages of working in a rural community and retain their employment in a small

community. Figure 2 below represents the multiple advantages of working in a rural school.

Conversely, rural schools face challenges that urban districts do not experience. Rural

areas struggle with isolation, lack of resources, and lack of amenities. Rural areas tend to be

poorer than urban areas (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019), and research confirms districts with low

socioeconomic status are harder to staff. Another disadvantage found by many is the lack of

diversity in small communities. Residents form close, stable, and largely ethnically

homogeneous relationships (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019). Those seeking employment may

overlook small schools for fear they may not fit in or be accepted by the community. Another

disadvantage reported by many researchers is the isolation factor that deters individuals from

accepting teaching positions in rural areas. Scholarly research reflects geographic, social, or

professional isolation as one of the primary challenges in rural areas (Boylan & McSwan, 1998;

Hammer et al., 2005; Lyles, 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004). In addition, the seclusion of rural

schools leads to a lack of resources. Teachers in rural areas describe the need for adequate

resources, such as curriculum and technology, and the lack of a professional learning community

as problematic in the workplace environment (Lyles, 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004). Educators

in rural schools also express a higher-than-average workload. Teachers in rural areas regularly

teach multiple subjects and play numerous roles, subsequently increasing their duties (Brenner,

2016; Lyles, 2016; Osterholm et al., 2006).

     One final disadvantage or significant barrier rural schools face is inadequate funding

(Reeves, 2003); rural districts, on average, receive just 17% of state education funding (Lavalley,

2018). Local property taxes are a funding source for North Dakota schools, resulting in rural

areas receiving less funding due to fewer residents. The overlapping of these constructs

proliferates the demand for teacher candidates in rural areas. Figure 2 below represents the

disadvantages of working in a rural community.

Figure 2

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in a Rural School
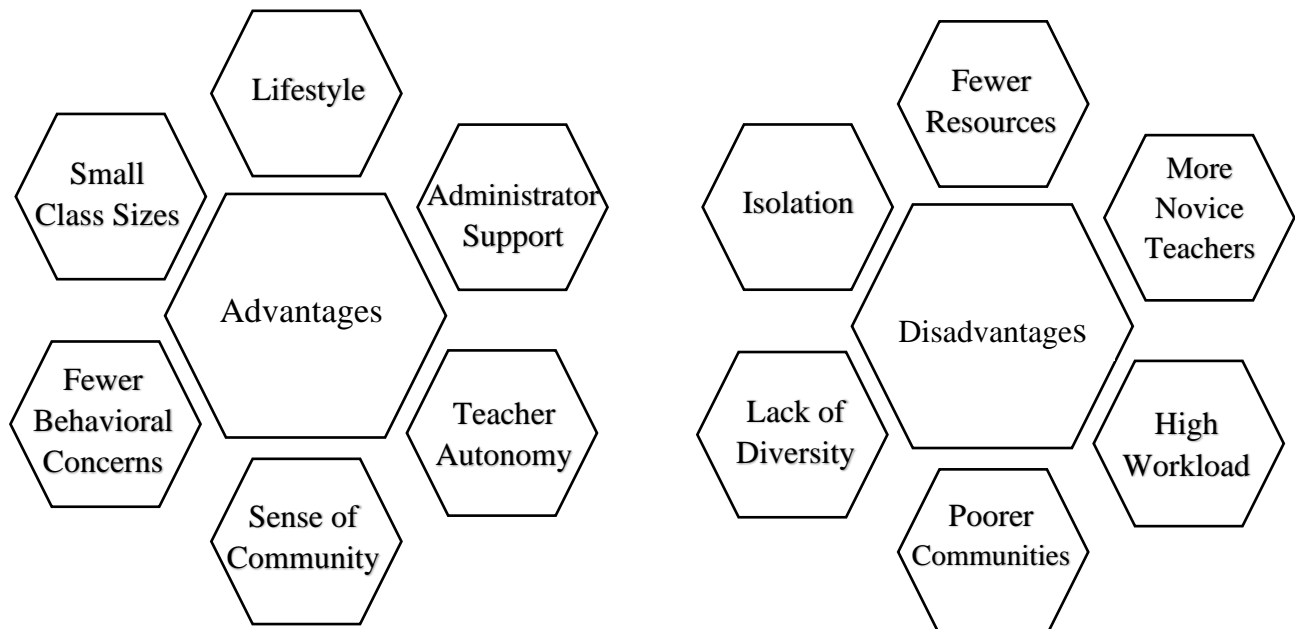
Retention Factors

Finding that three in four schools are rural, teacher retention is a pressing matter to study (Strange et al., 2012). Almost a quarter of our nation's youth are educated in rural environments, and in North Dakota, over one-third of the students are receiving educational programming in rural districts (Strange et al., 2012). Research found that North Dakota policymakers value and address rural education issues; however, the state has one of the lowest teacher salaries compared to other states (Strange et al., 2012). Compensation, along with numerous other relevant factors, influence the retention of teachers.

Salary

Increased teacher salaries proved successful in retaining quality teachers (Bland et al., 2014). Whether rural or urban, teachers' salaries fall 18.7 percent less than other college-educated workers (Will, 2018). Teacher salaries in rural areas often fall below the national average, decreasing a districts' opportunity to attract educators (Harmon, 2001; Jimerson, 2003). "This holds true for beginning salary, average salary, and highest salary on the pay scale" (Jimerson, 2003, p. 8). Although salary is not the only factor determining high turnover rates from rural areas, the research validates its significance to teacher retention. Allen (2005) declares, "the research provides strong support for the conclusion that compensation plays a key role in the recruitment and retention of teachers" (p. 89). The Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) revealed that teachers in rural schools in 2011-2012 were making $33,200, compared to $40,500 earned from their urban peers (Latterman & Steffes, 2017). This disparity alone may deter professionals from seeking employment in remote areas. Many North Dakota districts have responded to this discrepancy by increasing base pay in rural, remote areas to attract teachers. North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) reports the average first-year teacher in

a rural area as $41,873 compared to an average first-year teacher in a midsize city as $42,209

(2021). Although a first-year teacher's salary is comparable across the state, as teachers gain

experience, the gap in salary increases significantly. NDDPI (2021) discloses an average salary

difference of over $10,000 after the first year of employment.

Administrative Support

Many studies have found a lack of administrative support as one key factor in teachers

leaving the field (Bland et al., 2014; Curtis, 2012). Support from administrators includes

recognizing and rewarding teacher accomplishments, student behavior interventions,

professional development opportunities, high teacher morale, and a professional, collegial

atmosphere. 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. Gehrke and McCoy (2007) espouse that a high level of job satisfaction affects whether

a teacher stays or leaves the profession. The literature conveys those who experience a higher

level of job satisfaction are more likely to remain employed in that position.

Administrator support influences teacher retention when promoting a safe and well-

managed school environment (Inman & Marlow, 2004). A school administrator is considered the

instructional leader whereby possessing attributes that foster success amongst all personnel.

Educational leaders understand the importance of creating a positive and supportive environment

to successfully recruit and retain quality teachers (Lowe, 2006). As a result, effective leadership can lessen teacher turnover while improving retention.

Induction/Mentoring Programs

Induction/mentoring programs encourage new teachers through a multi-faceted support system. Programs often include being assigned a mentor, meeting frequently, and focusing on activities found to increase teacher retention (Picucci, 2016). Along with many other states, North Dakota has implemented a comprehensive mentoring program to promote and sustain retention. Specifically, in the 2019-2020 school year, those teachers assigned a mentor were retained at a 10 percent higher rate than those who did not enroll in the program (NDTSS, n.d.). Well-organized mentoring and induction programs are connected to numerous positive outcomes for students and staff. Many scholars found improvement in teacher retention, teacher working conditions, instructional practices, and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2017; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). It should be noted these programs should be designed with the exclusive needs of each district or state.

New teacher induction and mentoring programs embedded in novice teacher training will decrease teacher attrition and turnover (Portner, 2005; Wong, 2005). Mentoring and induction programs provide many benefits to 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). Unquestionably, these programs set the foundation for educator success in the profession, increasing the likelihood they will remain.

Working Conditions

"Data suggest that the roots of the teacher shortage, largely reside in working conditions within the schools and districts" (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003, p.4). These occupation characteristics can be defined as either positive or negative depending on a teacher's personal experience and are closely associated with a teacher's longevity in a school district. According to Sutcher and colleagues (2016), teachers who identified poor teaching conditions in high-poverty schools were twice as likely to move schools or leave the profession. Unsatisfactory work conditions identified by researchers include limited professional development, isolation, appropriate work assignments, and inadequate administrator support.

In contrast, favorable working conditions are comprised of a practical workload, administrative support, participation in decision-making, professional development opportunities, induction/mentoring programs, teacher autonomy, and collegiality (Mikkelson, n.d.). A desirable working condition for teachers in rural areas is the relatively low student-teacher ratio. The lower ratios in rural schools affect teachers' expected workload and present smaller class sizes (Monk, 2007). District leaders should concentrate on acknowledging and improving teacher work conditions as a method for increasing teacher retention.

Summary

Understanding the significance of teacher retention in rural areas can assist educational leaders in retaining their most valuable resource, the teachers, and reduce the negative cost of teacher turnover (Ulferts, 2016). The key to maintaining a sustainable teacher workforce is finding individuals who are compatible with the hiring rural school's environment (Tran et al., 2020). Teachers, principals, superintendents, community members, and state leaders should take an active role in creating and supporting programs that increase retention. Various scholars

declare retention as a complicated issue affecting schools; however, teacher turnover can diminish with thoughtful planning and effort.

Synthesis of the Research Findings

The research overwhelmingly maintains the teacher shortage as problematic while creating hardships for many school districts, particularly rural schools. Natkin and Mooney (2003) report that district superintendents in rural areas cite recruitment and retention of teachers as their number one challenge. These issues have been apparent for decades and are not improving rapidly enough to fill rural school vacancies.

Federal education policies are designed to invoke beneficial changes; however, the NCLB requirements contributed to the shortage in rural schools. Policymakers noted the lack of equity for rural and urban schools and passed NCLB, which became an obstacle for many districts as they struggled to employ highly qualified teachers. The most recent policy, ESSA, allows states more local control, which holds optimism for states with high concentrations of rural schools.

Due to the increase in teacher turnover, research should focus on decreasing turnover, which will reduce the demand for teachers (Ingersoll, 2001). Thus, recognizing and applying the strategies that lead teachers to stay coincidentally will produce less teacher turnover. Retention of rural teachers is the overarching challenge faced by many leaders across the nation, and without immediate intervention, the problem will persist.

A critical finding drawn from the research is the impact of teacher retention on high student achievement. District accountability measures student outcomes at the same time corresponding with teacher effectiveness. As studied by Ronfeldt et al. (2011), they "suggest that changes in teachers' effectiveness explain much of the observed relationship between teacher

turnover and student achievement" (p. 15). Thus, making it impossible to overlook the imperative nature of retaining teachers as an investment in student academic proficiency.

Teacher retention not only plays a role in the shortage but has also proven to be a cost-effective strategy for school districts. The financial burden of hiring and training new teachers is a significant expenditure for schools (Barnes et al., 2007; Brenner, 2000). Teacher replacement costs vary by district size and geographical location, one study estimating $4400 in a small district to nearly $18000 in an urban district, equating to billions of dollars annually (Carroll, 2007; Castro et al., 2018). Ingersoll (2004) coined the term 'revolving door effect,' which refers to the continuous cycle of searching for replacements due to teachers' exodus. Schools engaged in Ingersoll's phenomenon encounter broken social relationships, inadequate educational experiences, and novice teachers as replacements. The funds spent on hiring and replacing teachers could be more wisely spent on establishing working conditions that lead to job satisfaction, decreasing the costly turnover of teachers.

The research cited in the literature review incorporated a combination of both qualitative and quantitative work. Both methodological approaches brought a thorough understanding of how teacher retention impacts an entire organizational structure. The qualitative studies garnered a detailed account of why teachers remain and the personal experiences that led to enjoyment in a career so many choose to leave. In contrast, quantitative studies often cannot delve into exclusive characteristics, such as the participant's feelings. However, these studies do produce a much larger sample size increasing the generalizability of the study. Gathering data from both methods of research provided a comprehensive conclusion on the importance of teacher retention.

Qualitative researchers assume their worldview influences the theoretical framework of their research (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Social constructivism, the theoretical framework guiding this study, postulates that knowledge is organically created based on one's social surroundings. Creswell and Poth (2018) state the constructivist worldview is found in phenomenological studies where individuals describe their experiences. This theory on how humans experience life does bring criticism from some scholars. Researchers Liu and Matthews (2005) assert that the role of the individual is ignored, and "the collective being always larger than the total sum of individual persons underpins a major part of Vygotsky's theoretical system" (p. 392). In this case, an individual uses society as a method for growth rather than only a perceptional understanding of one's environment.

The literature review on teacher retention in rural areas found common factors that lead to elevated teacher turnover rates. Work conditions are recognized as a predominant motive for teachers choosing to leave the profession in rural areas. These work conditions include administrative support, lack of resources, and a feeling of isolation. Given these are determinants of teacher retention, improving work conditions should be at the forefront of administrators' decision-making practices.

An extensive amount of literature determined a lack of qualified educators in rural schools, thus demonstrating the urgency of retaining effective teachers. This research seeks to identify experienced teachers' rationale for maintaining their employment in a rural North Dakota school. This study will be best accomplished through a qualitative analysis using semi-structured interviews to acquire an accurate view of long-staying, rural teachers. The research aims to illustrate the significance of teacher retention in rural districts and its importance to leaders and

policymakers. Rather than focus on the negative reasons teachers leave, the research will highlight the positive factors related to working in rural districts.

Critique of Previous Research Methods

Although comprehensive studies are available, a greater focus of the research relates to more populated districts. An extensive amount of literature spotlights hard-to-staff schools and draws experiences from teachers and inner-city urban districts (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Not to say studying urban teacher retention is not important, but rather rural districts deserve equal attention. The commonalities between high-minority urban schools and rural schools are vastly different, making it difficult to assume the research applies to all demographic settings.

Just as the demographics are not comparable, nor are methodological research approaches. Quantitative researchers share the belief that there is a single reality; on the other hand, qualitative researchers assume the world is made up of multiple realities constructed through social interactions (Fraenkel et al., 2019). The latter approach aligns more closely with this research.

Although excellent quantitative research is plentiful, offers a great deal of statistical data, and depicts an accurate understanding of teacher retention, there lacked a deep understanding of 'why' educators elected to stay or leave. Qualitative research offers insight into the participants' lived experiences and their frame of mind while engaging in a shared phenomenon. Even though a plethora of qualitative research is available, very few used a phenomenological approach to collecting data (Friesen, 2016; Goodpaster et al., 2018). Many scholars chose case studies to support their research. Whether collective or multiple, case studies take one issue or concern and incorporate numerous case studies to illustrate the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Several of these studies surfaced and provided valuable data (Anderson, 2014; Lyles, 2016; Watts, 2016). These case studies' sample sizes varied from 6 to 23 participants and included focus groups and interviews of teachers, principals, superintendents, and administrative staff. All three studies' settings were rural schools, and other than one study spanning three years, the remaining studies collected data in a single interaction. The researchers' data analysis included collecting field notes, recording interviews, and finding themes in the participants' responses to understand the essence of rural teacher retention better. These practices follow Creswell and Poth's (2018) approach to qualitative data analysis.

Another deficit noted in the research was the abundance of literature on teacher recruitment in conjunction with teacher retention. It appears that if teacher retention rates are low, then teacher recruitment becomes increasingly critical, therefore driving the need for research in this area. For this reason, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) support the research on recruitment but also ascertain that research can be two-fold and include retention.

In addition, the literature specific to North Dakota is insufficient for the purposes of this study. In contrast, a wide range of literature related to rural teacher retention in other areas of the country is readily accessible. The researcher was unable to locate one study specific to the state and the topic. Data on teacher retention in North Dakota were noted in one study by Strange et al. (2012), as it included a compilation of data from all 50 states.

A significant limitation found in most studies is the generalizability to the rural area defined within the research. Some were specific to Alaska or Tennessee, yet some very prominent global studies were conducted in Australia through Boylan's work. However, it is difficult to generalize to the rural areas of North Dakota as many differences need to be

accounted for, such as student and family demographic data, fiscal resources, access to more urban areas, and district size.

This study seeks to fill the literature gap by exploring why individuals in rural North Dakota persevere in the profession rather than abandon it like many of their peers. An in-depth study of the motivational factors of settled teachers will help school leaders implement strategies to retain quality educators. One conclusion that most researchers can agree on is the benefit of keeping highly effective teachers in the classroom and the profession.

Summary

High rates of turnover and attrition have led to unfavorable outcomes for students and school districts. Ingersoll et al. (2014) explain that the teacher labor force has become less stable over the last two decades. If this trend continues, school districts will have to find alternative ways to provide students with adequate educational experiences. This study seeks to find the motives that lead North Dakota educators to remain and how those identified factors can improve rural teacher retention across the state.

Much of the research suggests rural areas being associated with negative perspectives. In contrast, the researcher would like to deviate and highlight the advantages of rural employment in education for this study. "The literature on rural education also asserts that there are qualities unique to rural sites that demand increased attention in the field of educational research" (Gallo & Beckman, 2016, p. 1). This study can contribute to the existing literature on rural retention.

A rural school not only serves students but is often the largest employer in the isolated area and community members. "Rural communities draw much of their sense of identity from their district and their school" (Johnson et al., 2014, p. 25). In its absence, individuals suffer a loss of their close-knit community. One broad lesson learned from this literature review on

teacher retention in rural areas is the inescapable notion that educators who remain in the

classroom bring about enormous positive influences for the students, the school, the district, and

the community.

Retaining quality teachers is an avenue to building an institution of excellence, a priority

for school districts. Educational leaders across the state will benefit from this qualitative study as

they implement similar strategies to increase teacher retention while improving student

achievement and providing instructional distinction. A thorough description of the

phenomenological methodology will be discussed in the next chapter, outlining the research

design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

Numerous researchers have studied the factors that lead to increased teacher retention and the factors influencing teachers to leave. This study investigates the reasons rural teachers in North Dakota remain in the classroom. The literature review in Chapter Two reveals an association between high academic outcomes for students with experienced teachers. Whether rural or urban, district leaders are cognizant of this finding and, as a result, seek to retain highly effective teachers as an avenue to increase student achievement.

This chapter further outlines the study's purpose and the methodological approach employed to study rural teacher retention. A detailed description of the research design, participant selection and protection, and data collection are included. Data analysis follows Giorgi's framework of phenomenological studies (Giorgi, 1976). Finally, the instruments utilized and ethical considerations are articulated.

Purpose of the Study

As described in Chapter One (see pages 2-10), the purpose of the study is to examine the factors that lead long-staying teachers to maintain employment in a rural North Dakota school. The teacher exodus rate is very high throughout the country (Ingersoll, 2001), thus creating many challenges for schools, particularly rural districts. These challenges reflect financial hardships, lower student achievement, and increased novice teachers in the field. Teacher retention is a compelling topic where much research exists; however, scarce traces relate to North Dakota rural districts.

The literature review uncovered two deficits related to teacher retention, where this study seeks to fill the gap. Broad research from across the United States exists on the reasons teachers

leave the profession. In contrast, this study fills the void by investigating the factors that lead educators to stay, and secondly, the research is specific to North Dakota rural districts. Additionally, the study explores the professional commonalities shared among experienced teachers across several regions of the state.

Although quantitative research accommodates a large sample size and provides considerable data related to rural teacher retention, a qualitative approach probes the rationale behind a teacher's decision to persevere in what is sometimes considered an undesirable position. The interviews gather the participants' realities; therefore, disclosing their lived, real-world experiences. Scotland (2012) asserts that reality is individually constructed; thus, delving into each participant's reality is imperative to this study. This study's framework embraces the interpretive paradigm, whereby evaluating the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the research.

Research Design

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

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?

Design Framework

A qualitative phenomenological approach examines 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, the researcher needs to capture the

phenomenon's essence by clearly identifying 'what' the participants experience and 'how' they

experience it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Applying a hermeneutical phenomenological approach

guided by a social constructivist viewpoint is suitable for this study. Kakkori (2009) describes

phenomenology as the study of an essence and hermeneutics as the process of interpretation.

From an ontological perspective, the reality of working in a rural community is established.

Furthermore, from the epistemological perspective, the researcher understands the participants'

realities through their lived experiences while engaging in the interview process.

Research question one will be answered through semi-structured interviews, which will

provide data on the factors influencing experienced teacher retention. The data collected offers

fundamental reasons some remain when close to 50 percent leave the field within the first five

years (Barnes et al., 2007). The second research question highlights the commonalities found

within the phenomenon studied. Through thoughtful consideration, a qualitative

phenomenological approach exhibits the characteristics deemed most appropriate for this study.

Participant Selection

The outcome of this study seeks a phenomenological understanding of what motivates

rural teachers to remain employed when many of their peers choose to exit the profession. A

critical decision in qualitative research is selecting the participants for the study. Kuper et al. (2008) espouse that qualitative research blends participants' experiences with the construction of meaning related to the research questions. Thus, all individuals chosen for the study have experienced the phenomenon to address the research questions adequately.

Although many participants produce more generalizable data, it is either impossible or cost-prohibitive to study all instances of the phenomenon (Oppong, 2013). On the other hand, qualitative researchers most often work with small samples studied in-depth to fully understand the phenomenon's context (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, five to eight participants will be recruited to supply data for the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Dukes (1984) suggest sample sizes of 3 to 4 individuals with a maximum of 10 to 15. They deem this number of participants acceptable to garner relevant data. A small sample size is one characteristic of qualitative phenomenology, whereby allowing the researcher to identify common themes as they emerge throughout the data collection process. One drawback to this methodology is its limited transferability, as it produces highly contextualized data with subjective interpretations (Scotland, 2012). However, for this study, a rigorous interview process with a select few individuals appears to be most fitting to answer the aforementioned research questions.

Participants must possess a set of well-defined criteria for the researcher to study the phenomenon of rural teacher retention appropriately. To be considered for the study, individuals must be under contract or actively employed in a rural district at the interview time. The definition for rural applied to this study is a district with fewer than 1000 students. The teachers must also hold professional experience of five or more years in a rural classroom. Teachers who are retiring are also considered for this study, considering they meet the required criteria to qualify. Allowing newly retired teachers the opportunity to participant increases the range of

candidates available for this study. In addition, participants living arrangements do not affect participation. An individual need not live in the rural community where they are employed to participate in the study.

Individuals not qualifying as participants would have worked less than five years in a rural school or those working in a district with more than 1000 students (not just school enrollment). Gender, marital status, sexual orientation, race, grade level, or content taught are not exclusionary factors for participation. All things considered, participant recruitment and selection are paramount to designing and conducting a credible and trustworthy study.

Procedures

Participant Selection

A purposive sampling method was adopted to select participants for this study, which is often used in qualitative research (Devers & Frankel, 2000; Etikan et al., 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Purposive sampling is often interchangeable with the purposeful sampling method noted in Creswell and Poth (2018). According to Etikan et al. (2016), a purposive sampling technique deliberately chooses a participant based on the individual's qualities. In this study, information-rich participants offer applicable insight into a rural North Dakota teacher's lived experiences. The regional map below (Figure 3) will be utilized to recruit participants ensuring representation from regions across the state, increasing generalizability.

Figure 3

Regional Map of North Dakota
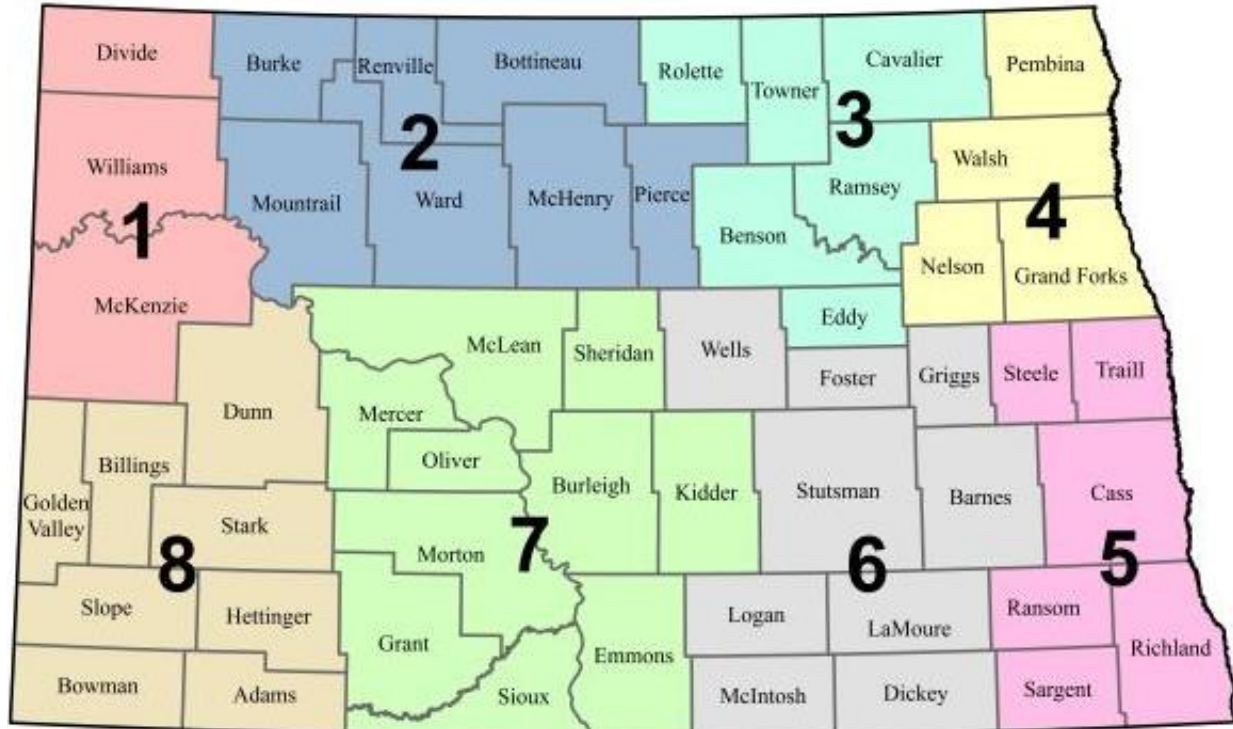
Note: Figure 3 referenced from https://www.business.nd.gov/resources/RegionalCouncil/

The recruitment of participants is binary. The researcher first identified districts that meet the criteria for being labeled rural (1000 or fewer students) through the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction website. Then, long-staying teachers will be sought out through the superintendent. An email will be sent to district superintendents requesting individuals who meet the qualifying factors to participate. The researcher must ensure superintendents from all regions of the state are included in the recruitment process. Recruitment should result in a substantial group of potential participants from which the researcher will contact through email to acquire a propitious sample. Even though the researcher has access to several qualifying participants, those peers and colleagues will not be considered for this study. Creswell (2007)

asserts that qualitative researchers should empower individuals to share their experiences while minimizing the power relationship between a participant and the researcher. Hence, all participants interviewed will have no relationship or connection to the researcher, thereby eliminating a power relationship that may exist with a peer or colleague.

Email correspondence is the primary source of communication, confirming all participants meet the requirements for participation. Once participants are deemed qualified and accept the invitation to participate in the study, the researcher will reach out per the participant's requested method (phone or web-based video conferencing) to schedule a time and location for the interview. Within this conversation, the informed consent document will be provided via email to the participants to view before participation. They will be given the option to verbally commit to the research or return the signed informed consent form to the researcher via email.

To best represent North Dakota, participant selection occurred from all regions of the state with no disclosure of school or district identifiers. All participants and their schools are assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality and the disclosure of any revealed private information. Kaiser (2009) reports qualitative researchers face a conflict between recording detailed, accurate accounts of the participants' social realm and protecting their identities. The protection of an individual's identity and the school where they are employed is pivotal during the data collection, data analysis, and reporting of the research findings.

Protection of Participants

Not only will names and districts be non-identifiable, but any personal information that may emerge during the data collection process will also remain confidential. Strict guidelines are set to safeguard and preserve the identity of all participants. Polit and Beck (2006) remind researchers to be selective when describing defining characteristics of the participants, which

might inadvertently reveal their identity. This can be especially true in rural areas where

anonymity is difficult.

The informed consent required for participation in the study outlines an individuals'

rights, the study's purpose, confidentiality, the potential risks and benefits, and method of

gathering data. There are no known risks to participating in this study other than possible

uncomfortable feelings associated with disclosure of private experiences. The participant has the

right to withdraw at any time during the interview. The expected benefits include finding

commonality among teachers choosing to build a career in a rural community, thus providing

invaluable teacher retention data to district leaders and policymakers in North Dakota.

Data Collection

Collecting data is critical in research as it brings about a better understanding of the

methodology guiding the study. The individuals who agree to participate in the study will

acknowledge and sign the informed consent, after which an interview date and time will be

scheduled. Semi-structured interviews are the main instrument for collecting data for the study.

Jamshed (2014) details how semi-structured interviews constitute preset open-ended questions

with typically more than 30 minutes of interview durations. No dichotomous questions will be

used for this study as they discourage depth from the participant's responses. While there is no

time limit for the interviews, the researcher anticipates each unique interview to last

approximately one hour.

Gathering data in a participant's natural setting is vital to this phenomenological research.

Moustakas (1994) recommends the use of two broad questions that reach the heart of a study:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?

2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences in the phenomenon?

Therefore, the interview questions of this study derive from Moustakas' (1994) work. COVID-19 protocols require the researcher and participants to conduct interviews over web-based video conferencing rather than in-person to guarantee the participants' and researcher's health and safety. Therefore, interviews will take place over web-based video conferencing (unless the participant requests an alternative method) and be recorded to ensure complete accuracy of the individual's responses. Conducting a video conference increases the researcher's ability to interview individuals without geographic location as a determinant of participation (Sullivan, 2012). Written transcriptions along with the video recordings are utilized for this study. The electronic files are secured on a password-protected computer during and after the study's data analysis. In addition to recording the interview, field notes are taken while engaged in the data collection process to capture what the researcher hears, sees, and experiences during the interview. Opdenakker (2006) suggests that even if an interview is recorded, the researcher should still take notes during the interview to be reminded of social cues, such as voice, intonation, and body language. To further detail the interview process, the researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2018, p. 166) approach to data collection:

- Determine the research questions to be answered.

- Identify interviewees based on purposeful sampling procedures.

- Distinguish type of interview based on mode and interactions.

- Collect data using adequate recording procedures.

- Design and use an interview protocol to guide interactions.

- Refine interview procedures through pilot testing.

- Locate a distraction-free place for interviews.

- Obtain consent from the interview to participate.

- As an interview, follow good interview procedures.

- Decide transcription logistics.

Following the interview process, each interview is assigned an original code to ensure each participant's confidentiality and anonymity. All written notes and transcribed material are protected in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. All electronic data are stored securely on a password-protected computer with researcher access only, including the audio/video recordings. When transcribing the interview data, pseudonyms replace all identifiers to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. All materials generated from this study are kept secure on a password-protected computer for five years per IRB guidelines.

Finally, qualitative data is often scrutinized for its lack of validity and reliability. As cited in Creswell and Poth (2018), Angen (2000) espouses two types of validation: ethical validation and substantive validation, both of which apply to this study. Ethical validation refers to the researcher's underlying moral assumptions, ethical implications, and equitable treatment of all participants (Angen, 2000). Substantive validation pertains to understanding the topic derived from other sources, which is noted in the literature review within Chapter Two. To address reliability, the researcher follows Giorgi's (1976) method for phenomenological research.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews serve as the data source for this study. Per COVID-19 pandemic recommendations, interviews will be conducted over a web-based video conferencing unless requested otherwise. This platform offers face-to-face interaction through electronic connection, and the researcher will record the interview with the participants' permission. The

audio recording will be transcribed through Trint, a software program designed to facilitate

accurate transcription. Upon completing the transcription process, member checking, an essential

component to verify the transcript is approved by each participant, will be employed. This

process allows the participant to correct any inaccuracies in the data provided, enabling the

researcher to cross-check the data.

A phenomenological approach is the foundation of this 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 (Langdridge,

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 across the world. Table 2 provides detailed procedures for conducting data analysis in a

phenomenological study.

Table 2

Giorgi's Data Analysis Process

R=Researcher, P=Participant	R interviews P reflecting the phenomenon under study. The original description is from the perspective of the lifeworld or ordinary life. If data collection was by means of an interview, R transcribes it verbatim.
Step 1	R reads the entire transcription in order to grasp the basic sense of the whole situated description.
Step 2	R assumes the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction.
Step 3	R, within phenomenological reduction, creates parts by delineating psychological meaning units. A meaning unit is determined whenever R, in a psychological perspective and mindful of the phenomenon being researched,

	experiences a transition in meaning when he or she rereads the description from the beginning.
Step 4	R, still within phenomenological reduction, then intuits and transforms P's lifeworld expressions into expressions that highlight the psychological meanings lived by P.
Step 5	Based upon the transformed meaning units, and still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, R uses the transformed meaning unit expressions as the basis for describing the psychological structure of the experience.

Note: Adapted flowchart of data analysis process (Giorgi et al., 2017, p. 182)

Creswell and Poth (2018) also note that Miles and Huberman's data analysis model is widely used in the qualitative data analysis process. They utilize a three-part analysis, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This method of analysis aligns with steps two through five of Giorgi's flowchart (see Table 2).

After careful analysis, data reduction occurs when the researcher notices significant statements or quotes within the participants' responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These statements are then combined into meaning units or themes. Upon determining meaning units, Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest developing textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon to describe and present the essence.

Instruments

Role of the Researcher

The qualitative researcher is the primary research instrument for data collection and analysis of interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Frankel and Devers (2000) assert the same notion but add that relationships are developed throughout the data collection process. The researcher must remain mindful of the relationships that transpire during the research process to protect the study's ethical nature. Creswell & Poth (2018) remind researchers to "focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that

the researchers bring to the research" (p. 44). This philosophy is critical to analyzing the data through a non-biased lens.

This study requires a skilled researcher to conduct credible, dependable, and valid interviews while following ethical research guidelines. The researcher possesses the skills necessary to conduct interviews for this study, as evidenced through successful field research interviews approved through the qualitative methodology course at Minnesota State University (MSUM). With the knowledge acquired through rigorous coursework and personal experiences, the researcher is well prepared to conduct this comprehensive study.

Previous Knowledge and Bias

The researcher's interest in rural educator retention, along with the desire to uncover perceptions of long-staying teachers, catapults this study. The researcher's experience working as an administrator in a rural North Dakota school coupled with continuous teacher turnover prompted a deeper dive into the magnitude of teacher retention. The researcher's positionality should be disclosed at the beginning of the research process, as the researcher brings axiological assumptions to the study. The axiological assumption acknowledges the researcher's values and biases, along with a disclosure of positionality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For this study, the researcher's positionality reasons that a reduction in teacher turnover and increased rural teacher retention will evoke positive student outcomes. To compensate for the axiological assumption, the researcher must remain inherently cognizant of epoché or bracketing one's experiences and feelings toward the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) reminds researchers to apply a transcendental phenomenological approach to take on a fresh new perspective with each interview and leave out one's experiences. The researcher's training and experience as a professional school counselor laid the foundation for removing one's personal

biases when interacting with individuals, along with high-level course work in the Doctor of

Education Program at MSUM.

Trustworthiness

In all research methodologies, dependability and credibility must be established to ensure

the phenomenon's truth is revealed. Phenomenological research uses an audit trail and member

checking to ascertain both constructs (Simon & Goes, 2018). An audit trail describes the action

steps from the beginning of the research process to reporting the findings (Simon & Goes, 2018).

This study's audit trail follows Creswell and Poth's (2018) data collection approach and Giorgi et

al.'s (2017) data analysis process. Both the audit trail and the member checking convey accuracy

and truthfulness within the research. Scotland (2012) maintains research must provide rich

evidence and offer credible and justifiable accounts (internal validity/credibility) that another

researcher can replicate. The researcher will take all measures to establish procedures that deem

the research trustworthy from beginning to end.

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

</div>

Ethical challenges arise based on the unpredictable nature of the methodology involved

during the research process. Creswell and Poth's (2018) approach to ethical challenges must be

examined throughout all phases of the research process. The stages of research where a

researcher must consider ethical issues are as follows:

Figure 4

Ethical Challenges Research Flowchart
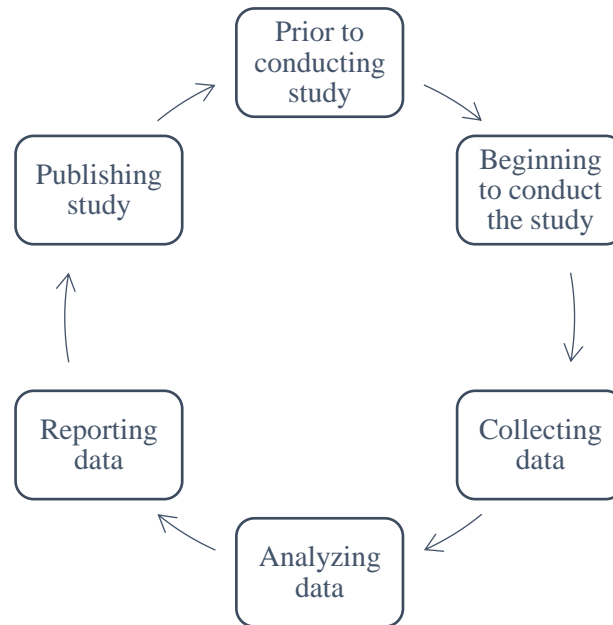
Note: Figure 4 from Creswell and Poth (2018, p. 55-56)

Prior to conducting research, this study was approved through Minnesota State University

Moorhead's International Review Board (IRB) on August 22, 2020. Two specific ethical

challenges pertaining to this study are 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 will be unknown

to the researcher. For this reason, no participants from current or previous school districts of the

researcher will be utilized for this study. Noting the ethical concern of anonymity and

confidentiality, all data will be assigned a pseudonym with no identifiers. Every effort will be

taken to substantiate ethical challenges that will be acknowledged and addressed throughout all

phases of the research process.

Summary

The interpretive framework that aligns with the research topic follows the social constructivist viewpoint. Creswell and Poth (2018) state the constructivist worldview is found in phenomenological studies where individuals describe their experiences. With this viewpoint, there is no single reality but rather multiple realities that will surface throughout the research process. From an ontological perspective, the research will include examining the reality of teachers who remain employed in a rural school. From an epistemological perspective, interpreting their reality by creating meaning from their experiences will result in the factors that have led teachers to stay. Finally, the methodological perspective will follow a phenomenological qualitative approach. This approach is defined as "A common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

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 essence of the phenomenon. For this reason, a small sample size, which is characteristic of a phenomenological study, allows the researcher to focus on five to eight participants' experiences. A purposive sampling method will identify qualifying participants, whereby the individuals will be provided with an informed consent outlining the details of the study.

Upon consent, the participants will engage in semi-structured interviews. The open-ended interview questions examine the participant's feelings, experiences, and beliefs about working in a rural school. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the researcher must listen carefully to what the participants say and how they describe their life experiences. Applying a hermeneutical phenomenology approach, which focuses on the lived experiences and interpreting the

participants' responses, is a logical choice for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All individuals will represent rural communities across the state, offering more generalizable data for the educational leaders and policymakers in North Dakota.

Langdridge (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 seeks 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 guides 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 accuracy of spoken and written words. The researcher also acknowledged her 'positionality' within the research to follow ethical standards of research. The researcher supports the methodology to understand the motivations of experienced teachers in rural North Dakota.

Chapter 4 will outline the research findings of the essence of the phenomenon under study. A comprehensive analysis of the data will be included. The results will be determined through Giorgi's method of data analysis and presented as such.

Chapter 4: Findings and Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the complex nature of the factors that influence teachers' decisions to remain teaching in a rural North Dakota school. This chapter outlines the researcher's role, a detailed description of the sample, the data analysis process, the presentation of data and associated findings, and finally, a synthesis of the findings. Chapter 4 describes the participants' experiences of working in a rural school for several years and, in some instances, decades. Additionally, the chapter exemplifies the essence of the phenomenon as verbalized by long-staying teachers.

From an epistemological perspective, Chapter 4 reflects the central findings of the research as expressed by the seven participants. Using a hermeneutical approach, qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and organized into themes to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. Three themes emerged as reasons rural teachers remain in a small community:

1. Teachers value connectedness and personalized relationships.

2. Teachers value rural conditions.

3. Teachers value administrator support and colleague mentorship.

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.

Researcher's Role

The researcher's interest in the topic is binary. Firstly, the researcher's employment as an administrator in a rural district motivated her to identify the factors that lead teachers to remain in a rural area, where hiring, training, and replacing employees was commonplace and

concerning. Secondly, long-staying experienced teachers are one determinant for increased

student achievement. The researcher's background experience and current role in education

prompted her to wonder if predictive factors motivated rural teachers to remain in small schools.

Considering 37.5 percent of North Dakota youth are educated in rural school districts (Barton,

2012) and that rural, Midwest schools experience 9.6 percent turnover rates (Carver-Thomas &

Darling-Hammond, 2017), the significance of teacher retention is imperative to schools. Rather

than focus on the factors that lead to a teacher's departure, this study spotlights the positive

reasons teachers remain.

The researcher serves as the primary research instrument for the study and must ensure a

non-biased data collection and analysis. With this in mind, the study was guided by the work of

several researchers throughout the data collection and analysis processes. Creswell and Poth's

(2018) work governs this phenomenological study, along with Moustakas' (1994)

recommendations for asking quality interview questions crafted to specifically answer the

research questions. Equally important, the researcher followed Giorgi's data analysis process,

which includes a review of the transcriptions, phenomenological reduction, creating meaning

units, making connections that highlight the participant's experiences by developing themes, and

finally, describing the essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi et al., 2017).

The study intended to gather teacher's positive perceptions of working in a rural

environment and the reasons they have chosen to stay. The study's findings and

recommendations can assist district administration and state policymakers in implementing

strategies that will increase teacher retention in rural North Dakota schools. Collectively, the

results and subsequent interpretations can prove beneficial to increasing teacher retention in rural

areas.

Description of the Sample

The researcher initially emailed 23 superintendents across all regions (see Figure 3) of the state; however, this generated zero potential participants. The researcher began this process in June, which is not ideal for educators, thus explaining an unsuccessful first endeavor. To address the lack of response rate, the researcher shifted her method of procuring participants. To maintain the integrity of the study, she utilized a snowball sampling method, which according to Creswell (2012), is a form of purposeful sampling where the researcher asks others to recommend potential participants. The researcher reached out to several personal contacts, such as colleagues and friends, to seek participants through their connections. This method produced a pool of potential participants, which were vetted and narrowed to seven qualified participants. Again, all participants were unknown to the researcher. This number of participants with a collective 150 years of classroom experience coincides with the participant recommendation by Creswell and Poth (2018) to substantiate the phenomenon's essence (see Table 3).

Table 3

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

The researcher and participants coordinated a date and time for an interview. Upon confirmation, a Zoom link and informed consent were sent to all participants, and four of the seven returned a signed copy. The remaining three participants verbally acknowledged receipt of the informed consent and gave their verbal permission at the onset of the Zoom interview. All participants were reminded of the procedures in place to guarantee confidentiality and protection of their identity.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

The researcher took several steps to ensure the study was conducted under authentic conditions, allowing the participants to speak their truth and recount their reality of working in a rural school. An audit trail following Creswell and Poth's (2018) interview process is described in a step-by-step process outlined below.

1. The researcher recruited participants confirming all participants were teachers in rural school districts with fewer than 1000 students and have more than five years of classroom experience.

2. Interview questions were piloted with two outside sources to ensure clarity and understanding.

3. All interviews were scheduled through email communication with participants at their convenience.

4. The researcher conducted interviews with participants following the interview protocol (Appendix A).

5. Raw, written transcription data was compared against the audio/video recording, and the researcher revised any incorrect words or phrases verbalized by the participants and corrected the written transcription.

6. The transcript was emailed back to the participants for final review and member checking.

7. Upon receipt of acceptance and accuracy of each individual's transcript, the researcher was able to move onto the data analysis phase.

The researcher asked all participants a series of questions (Appendix A) associated with working in a rural North Dakota 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.

All participants (unknown to the researcher) were interviewed over Zoom, a web-based video conferencing site. In addition to the recorded video, the researcher took field notes to capture any non-verbal cues expressed by the participants. Seven interviews resulted in six hours and 50 minutes of data, equating to an average of 58 minutes per interview. Although the researcher sought a participant from each region of the state, the researcher was unable to secure a participant from Region 1. Despite the researcher's intention to use Trint, a transcription service, the transcription feature embedded in the Zoom application was utilized and proved to be an effective method of transcription. Each line of transcription was numbered and time-stamped for easy reference. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher viewed the video recording and corrected the transcript as necessary to further ensure all transcribed data were accurate. The edited transcripts were emailed back to the participants for member checking.

According to Fraenkel et al. (2019), member checking is a technique used to confirm the participants' words are valid and accurately describe the phenomenon under study.

After each interviewee approved and returned their edited transcript, they were assigned a pseudonym removing any participant's identifying information. In addition, school names were excluded; however, as noted in Table 3 above, the regional location was disclosed. These two methods of assurance allowed for complete participant anonymity.

Following Giorgi's (1976) method of data analysis (see Table 3), the researcher began by reading each transcript in its entirety to comprehend the ontological perspective of each individual's words (Giorgi et al., 2017). During this vital component of data analysis, the researcher underlined and circled words or phrases that appeared pertinent to the research questions. Along with making margin notes, the researcher began to write down keywords or phrases that surfaced numerous times throughout the transcriptions, thus creating preliminary meaning units. After completing this for each transcription, the researcher crafted individual datasheets for each participant. The researcher wrote down meaning units and emerging themes on each datasheet along with the transcription line number for quick reference. After reducing data and recording the meaning units on the seven datasheets, the researcher shifted the analysis to identify themes within the data.

This comprehensive compilation served as the platform for interpreting the data and creating themes. The final phase of data analysis, drawing conclusions or researcher interpretation, completed the analysis process for this study (Giorgi et al., 2017). It is noteworthy to report the researcher approached the data from a neutral standpoint or epoche while engaged in the analysis process. The researcher focused only on the participants' words and set aside personal thoughts related to the responses. Creswell and Poth (2018) refer to this as

phenomenological reflection, bracketing the researcher's personal experiences with the phenomenon.

<div align="center">**Presentation of Data and Results of the Analysis**</div>

Research Question 1 Findings

1. What factors contribute to the retention of experienced teachers in rural North Dakota?

The first research question encompasses the essence of the study. All interview questions were designed and written with research question one at the forefront and influenced by the work of Moustakas (1994); thus, all participant responses directly answered this question and, ultimately, research question two as well. Seven individuals took part in the interview process for this study, representing most of the state other than Region 1, which is located in the Northwest corner of the state (see Figure 3). However, the data received from the seven participants were vital and beneficial to this study. After completing the final interview, the researcher noted a saturation level as common words and phrases were expressed across the interviews.

The researcher identified three prominent themes related to the positive factors teachers remain in a rural district. Additionally, one theme emerged related to the challenges that exist in a rural area. The challenges verbalized represent the negative aspects of employment in rural North Dakota; however, they are notable matters that offer sound data related to rural teacher concerns. Table 4 illustrates how the researcher's analysis process led to meaning units and themes within the data.

Table 4

Snapshot of the Researcher's Analysis Process

Theme 1: Teachers value connectedness and personal relationships.		
Meaning Units	Verbalized Words/Phrases	Participant Responses
Student Relationships	- Know them personally - Working with students - Develop good rapport - Growth in students - Know all your students - Intimate	"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."
Families/Parents Relationships	- Know their parents - See them in the community - Friends - Build relationships	"You also know your parents, and it's just being part of the community."
Colleagues Relationships	- Sense of community - Easy to connect - Friends	"The relationships with my colleagues, we are very close, and it's very strong." "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."
Theme 2: Teachers value various rural conditions.		
Smaller Class Sizes	- Smaller class sizes - Fewer students - Manageable size - Smaller groups - Opportunities - Pupil/Teacher ratio	"You know the students really well because it is small."
Fewer Behavior Challenges	- Small school, smaller problems - Less intensive - Easier classroom management - Better students	"Since we have smaller numbers, we have smaller issues, we still have issues, just not at the scale of larger schools."

	• Fewer discipline problems	
Autonomy/Flexibility/ Freedom	• Admin doesn't interfere • Let me do my own thing • Not too much oversight • Classroom schedule changes	"I wouldn't get this type of freedom in a bigger school." "We have pretty good admin that do not micromanage my classroom – as long as I am hitting the standards."
Community	• Know everyone • Comfortable • Outstanding, great people • Raise my kids here • Supports the school	"I like working in a small community. We love the small community, the ties."
Rural Upbringing	• Grew up in a small town • Went to a small school • Came back to my hometown • North Dakota native	"I was used to a community feel because I came from a smaller town as well, and a smaller school."
Extracurricular Assignments	• Community • Choice • Build a program • Start a program	"I was asked to coach basketball, they never had an elementary program, so I started it."
Theme 3: Teachers value administrative support and colleague mentorship.		
Administrative Support/Colleague Support	• Very Supportive • Without their help • Good administration • Best principal	"Our elementary principal turned admin is our best principal ever." "On both ends of the building [referring to elementary and secondary], we've had so much more support."
Teacher Mentorship	• Help each other • Supportive • Mentor program • Transitioning	"My mentor was a world of wealth for me my first year.

Note: Table 4 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 the connections teachers have with students,

families/parents, or colleagues. The researcher needs to differentiate between the relationships as

they are incomparable. As the participants spoke about their experiences, each specific relationship has its own characteristics and value to their personal careers.

Students. The relationships developed with students are found to be relevant by all seven participants. Working in a K-12 school allows teachers to watch children grow up 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." In addition, Participant C went on to say, "the biggest positive thing for me was the relationships that I built with the kids and their families."

Participant S reported that although she had never taught in a large school, she predicts that it would be more challenging to make those important [across grade-level or content] connections with students since daily interactions are absent. Participant D also described developing a strong rapport with students as one of the positive attributes of working in a rural school. Participant T declares, "you just seem to know all of your students so much closer (pause in speaking), intimate." In all, the teachers' responses indicate the value of student relationships to their career satisfaction.

Families/Parents. Five of the seven teachers also recount 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 of 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. Through communication with the family, she learned of the student's autism diagnosis, 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.

Family relationships are vital to supporting students in school, as noted by several

participants in this study. 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. Participant D details how he works in tandem with the English teacher

during her *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit. He ensures students understand the Civil Rights

Movement and its connection to the novel. Furthermore, participant D values the collegial

relationship that enhances the collaborative effort of teaching across content areas.

In summary, the connectedness and relationships built between rural North Dakota

teachers and their students, families, and colleagues are crucial characteristics that exude

pleasant thoughts about working in a rural school. It is vital to note that relationships were

referenced by all seven participants, thereby making it an important theme for this study. The

strong relationships developed by all participants were evident and have proven beneficial to their retention.

Theme 2: Teachers value rural conditions.

      Small Class Sizes. Small class sizes are a characteristic of many rural schools in North Dakota, as enrollment is significantly less in these areas. Four of the seven participants directly asserted small class sizes are appreciated and valued in the rural setting. Participant T stated, "One of the reasons I stay is because of the size." The average class size in Participant T's district is 13 students per grade level (Insights, 2021). When asked the positive thoughts, experiences, or feelings of working in a rural school, Participant A explained, " probably the biggest as I work in a rural school is the pupil to teacher ratios. I know for a fact that I could not do what I do at [school name] in a larger school." This participant differentiates and teaches multiple small groups enabling students to learn at their levels, which she attributes to her school size. She stated, "if you have three or four in a group compared to five or six in a group, it is so much more manageable." She also added that the first-grade class was large last year, and the school board had committed to hiring an additional teacher when a class cycles through with higher than average numbers. Participant A pointed out this particular class will stay split until fourth grade. The participant from Region 3 stated, "You get to know the kids pretty well with the smaller class sizes, which is a big plus." Correspondingly, participant B expressed her positive feelings, "the relationships I'm able to have with the students, just because of the smaller class sizes."

      Fewer Behavioral Challenges. Again, when asking participants their positive thoughts related to working in a rural environment, participant T declared, "We have, of course, because we are smaller numbers, we have smaller issues, we still have issues, but I just don't think they

are at the scale that probably a Class A school may have." In North Dakota, Class A schools are located in urban areas with a larger student population than those in a Class B district. This study only includes participants that work in a Class B district. Participant B stated, "I think we have better than average kids, I have never been sworn at, and I have never been physically attacked." Participant A reported fewer discipline problems, and they are less intensive. She stated that a colleague who works in a much larger district has dealt with spitting, biting, kicking, and chairs flying across the room. Participant A asserted, "…you know I might be dealing with someone who won't do their homework. We have at-risk kids, but we just have fewer of them, and we don't have them in every classroom."

Participant D cited one of the biggest positives of working in a rural community is "you have less behavior issues, likely because of the smaller classes." Although the researcher did not inquire, it should be noted that the participant did not substantiate this claim with any empirical evidence or support. Nonetheless, four participants verbalized fewer behavioral challenges as a positive attribute to working in their rural school.

Autonomy/Flexibility/Freedom. Autonomy and flexibility refer to teacher's freedom to make independent decisions for their classroom. Participant B shared, "I like that I have choices: I have a pink classroom, I order my own curriculum," along with Participant D stating that he can do what he wants in his classroom without too much oversight [from the administration] and can teach the curriculum he chooses. Participant T enjoys the flexibility a rural school offers by revealing, "you know our math lesson went long, so I can shorten up social studies, and I don't know if I'd have that flexibility always [in another school]." Participant V also referred to flexibility as she and her colleagues have the luxury of following the standards and teaching the content how they see fit. She went on to say:

> The things that they [teachers in big school districts] tell us, it's like, oh my goodness, like there are three different 3rd grade classrooms, and they all have to be teaching the same thing on pretty close to the same day. I don't know if I could do that given all this freedom we have.

Considering all participants teach in a single section school (unless class sizes warrant a co-teacher), classroom autonomy is likely easier to achieve than in a large school with multiple sections where consistency and continuity are essential. The participants interviewed enjoy and appreciate the autonomy, flexibility, and freedom of choice in their rural classroom environment.

Community/Comfort. Interview data revealed a strong sense of community when working in a rural school. One participant expressed how everything she does in the community is related to the school in some way. A similar experience is reiterated by Participant S as she shared:

> The whole community would go to a ball game, and you know, everybody came. That was a social event because there is not a lot of other things to do around here. So I always volunteered to take tickets so I could talk to everyone when they came in, and they would say, so and so [referring to their child] came home today and said you did this in your classroom today. I just felt I knew everybody really well, which helped me feel more comfortable in the community.

This same participant went on to say:

> When we were studying a certain culture in social studies, the guy at the store would always donate food for that – you know they were always there if you needed something where, I feel if I was in a bigger community, I wouldn't have felt as comfortable like

going to a business and saying, would you like to donate or help out with this or that –

you know I went to school with the guy that owned the grocery store.

Community connections are vital in a rural area, and it seems they rely on support from one another. The sentiment, "you get a whole community feel with it, and I was used to that because I came from a smaller town and smaller school as well," was expressed by Participant D as he referred to what he values in his rural school. Finally, Participant T's heartfelt statement regarding her community:

To this day, they're the best people that we have ever been involved with [referring to the community members]. We found ourselves back in a community where the people were outstanding. What I value most about….(pause) working in a rural school is the sense of community.

Rural Upbringing. Despite only one participant explicitly detailing their rural upbringing, five of the seven participants alluded to feeling comfortable in their small community as they had grown up in a rural community with similar characteristics. Participant C specifically mentions her rural upbringing by articulating, "knowing that I came from a rural school and like, I wanted to keep teaching there." This statement acknowledged the comfort level of rural communities to this participant, in which she also desires to have her son attend a rural school. This same participant stated, "the world has changed, but they're also like young kids that grew up in a small town, and I was a young kid that grew up in a small town, so we had some of the same experiences." Another individual, Participant D, described, "I was used to that [community feel] because you know I came from a smaller town and a smaller school as well." Additionally, Participant S responded, "I enjoy working in a small community, especially I guess the community that I grew up in because I have a lot of ties here."

Extra-Curricular Assignments. The responsibility of taking on extra-curricular duties is not unusual in a rural school. Each participant has been assigned or is currently assigned to an extra-curricular duty (see Table 5). Participant T disclosed,

My kids are gone now, and you know…I guess I've got the time and I've got the knowledge and in a small school, it's really, really hard to build a program, and so I really want to continue to be a part of building this [volleyball] program. We've had such a turnover of coaches it's really hard to build a program that way.

Table 5

Extracurricular Assignments per Participant

Extracurricular Assignments	Participant
Track and Field Coach	Participants S, A, D, & C
Girls' Basketball Coach (elementary, junior high, and high school)	Participant S, T, & C
Football Coach	Participant D
Bus Driver	Participants S, V, & D
Weight Room Supervisor	Participant D
Cheerleading Advisor	Participant T
Volleyball Coach (junior high and high school)	Participants A, T, & C
Speech Coach	Participant B
Drama Coach	Participant B
Junior Class Advisor	Participant V

Participant S started the elementary basketball program at her school because she values the sport, and it would not have come to fruition had she not taken on the duty. Four participants

started their careers taking on extra-curricular assignments; however, they have since cut back or quit altogether when they started their own families. Participant A maintained, "I got the job because I would coach volleyball and start a program."

Similarly, the participant from Region 6 explained that when a teaching position opened within her district, one applicant was willing to coach an athletic team; conversely, the other applicant was not interested. For this reason, the applicant inclined to coach was offered the position. This same participant acknowledges, "I know the school, they feel more comfortable hiring from within the school just because of the training that the teachers or the staff has had." According to three participants, they value building a sports program within their schools.

Theme 3: Teachers value administrative support and colleague mentorship.

Teachers acknowledged the impact of support from their colleagues and their administration as beneficial to their careers. To further explain, the researcher is compelled to note the reported support originated from both administrators and colleagues, whereas the mentorship stemmed from colleagues alone. Some participants' responses in this study suggest targeted support as a determining factor to remaining in the field.

Administration. Five of the seven participants vocalized numerous positive affirmations associated with their school administration. Participant C divulged, "I really like my principal, she communicates really well, so when she wants you to do something, she will send you an email or come and talk to you, and she's very easy to work with." 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 Participant V confirmed administrative support includes both the superintendent and principal, referring to the impact of support emanates from the principal and the superintendent in their rural buildings. Participant V mentions, "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. 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." Five participants addressed the support received from administration as a positive factor to working in a rural North Dakota school, with two of them specifically acknowledging their superintendent.

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.

Knowing the first-hand impact and value of mentorship, this participant noticed one of her

colleagues, a new Filipino teacher hired by the participant's rural school, was struggling in the

classroom. 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). 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. As stated in Chapter 2, 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.

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. 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 can be perceived negatively by some.

- 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.

Isolation. According to many teachers, an additional undesirable attribute of working in a rural area is isolation (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Hammer et al., 2005; Lyles, 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004). Participant S matter of factly stated, "it's tough, and I'm sure you know I don't blame people for not wanting to come out here; there's not a whole lot for you, especially a single person." Although many perceive isolation as a negative, Participant S conversely explains how the isolation brings the community together because there is "nothing else to do." For example, when a basketball game is scheduled at the school, students, families/parents,

teachers, and community members attend the social gathering, thus enhancing the crucial

relationships between all stakeholders.

Staffing Challenges. It is not uncommon for isolated rural communities to struggle to

secure adequate staff for vacant positions. One participant shared:

> Over the years, we've had such a hard time getting staff; in fact, we had to go and hire a
>
> lot of people from the Philippines in the last couple of years, you know, then the kids
>
> don't know if they want to get to know them because they're going to leave. That has
>
> really changed our school, I believe, because of that we don't have the base of people that
>
> you know are committed to this [the school], don't get me wrong, they're good teachers,
>
> but you know they are not invested in this community.

Participant V addressed another concern:

> I just worry, you know, are we going to be able to fill our positions and be able to remain
>
> open, because of the simple reason that we won't have the people to keep our school
>
> going, not the students, I don't think we'll have an issue, it's keeping the staff at our
>
> school.

Additionally, Participant A shared that her superintendent had to coach some younger basketball

teams, which he wouldn't have done if they could have found someone. Staffing shortages

include certified staff but also extra-curricular, classified positions, and substitute teachers.

Lack of Resources. The participants in this study reported a lack of various resources.

One specific concern from Participant T was the lack of funding to update the aging building,

and Participant C articulated the lack of counseling services in her community and school, and

the participant from Region 2 cited a lack of library materials and updated technology. Even

though teachers have chosen to stay in their rural communities, the lack of specified resources is worrisome and inconvenient.

Additional Duties. Although several teachers disliked the overabundance of minor duties, such as recess, hallway, or lunch duty, the duties presented as more of a nuisance than a factor that might lead them to leave. When asked if there was one factor the participants could change about their rural school environment, the participant from Region 6 wished she did not have recess duty. Despite the fact that she finds the duty challenging and problematic during the North Dakota winters, she is well aware the district does not employ enough staff to cover this task. This teacher tolerates the duty because the positives of working in a rural school outweigh the few drawbacks.

Participant A expressed a potential concern related to wearing many hats: "so, you're wearing a lot of hats in these small schools, and I know that is one thing that might burn people out….you're balancing a lot, you're doing a lot of things." Wearing many hats is not uncommon in rural areas, whereby four of the participants acknowledged the additional duties in their small school. The participant from Region 4 indicated, "you play so many different roles," and Participant D divulged, "I had to get my bus certificate every year, and I feel, like you know, with a smaller school, you kind of have to be able to do that."

In sum, the challenges of working in a rural community have not influenced the participants' decision to leave their small school. The interview data suggest all participants' positive experiences in a rural school outweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, participants have chosen the rural environment to continue their education careers.

Research Question 2 Findings

2. What are the commonalities among teachers who remain employed in a rural North Dakota school district?

The second research question is designed to identify the common factors experienced by the participants, which was thoroughly answered through the data analysis phase. The researcher upholds Giorgi's (1976) method of analysis (see Table 2), a widely-used approach structured to extract the essence of the phenomenon. During the analysis phase, the researcher identified common themes that emerged throughout the process. Three primary commonalities surfaced as factors to working in a rural school.

The researcher's analysis discovered three main themes relative to this study; however, other similarities reveal themselves through the participants' interviews. The first commonality identified by the researcher was the connectedness and personalized relationships that participants develop with students, families/parents, and colleagues. The participants acknowledge that the rural environment is conducive for building these relationships. The second commonality, various rural conditions, encompassed several characteristics of rural schools identified by the participants as reasons they stay in rural North Dakota. Rural factors included small class sizes, fewer behavioral challenges, autonomy/flexibility/freedom, community/comfort, rural upbringing, and extra-curricular assignments. The third commonality uncovered among the participants was the targeted support and mentorship from their administration and colleagues.

Synthesis of the Research Findings

With hours of video and thousands of transcribed words, the phenomenon's essence revealed three prominent themes. The development of interview questions reflected Moustakas'

(1994) work, the interview protocol followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) procedures, and the data analysis process derived from Giorgi's (2017) research. The researcher conducted an audit trail ensuring the collection and analysis process were evaluated under ethical and researched-based practices.

The researcher felt it was essential to secure participants from different regions of the state in an effort to generalize the study. Each region other than Region 1 (see Figure 3) represents participants in this study. Although the researcher would have preferred representation from all areas, she discerned the data collected was adequate and reached the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Once all collected data were ready for analysis, the researcher immediately recognized common words and phrases that emerged. The word 'relationships' was verbally repeated by the participants many times, but it was important for the researcher to make sense of what 'relationships' signified. With this in mind, the researcher began to notice relationships including different populations, thus dividing the theme into three categories: student relationships, parent/family relationships, and colleague relationships.

Another perceived attribute the researcher uncovered was a broad category comprised of various rural conditions or factors. The two most distinguished rural factors are small class sizes and fewer behavioral challenges as they are declared critical factors in most participants' rural career satisfaction. Teacher autonomy, rural upbringing, community, and extra-curricular assignments completed this theme. These characteristics were imperative to include as rural factors, considering they are touted as reasons that influence the participants' decisions to remain in a rural North Dakota school.

The final theme was the support and mentorship participants receive from their administrators and colleagues. The researcher created one theme with these two constructs as they both referred to an outside entity that contributes to their longevity in a rural district. Again, the researcher differentiated between administration and colleagues as the data suggest support originated from both administrators and colleagues; however, mentorship primarily emanated from the participants' colleagues. Nonetheless, the participants felt that support and mentorship were critical to their comfort level and desire to stay in a rural area.

The researcher intended to focus on the positive factors that promoted high levels of teacher retention. However, she also felt it was vital to include the verbalized challenges of rural employment. The difficulties in a small school and rural community impact an individual's satisfaction with their career. Not to say these factors contribute to their exodus, but the knowledge one can glean from the participants can help administrators understand the challenges associated with working in a rural environment.

Summary

Research questions one and two are answered through the seven semi-structured interviews with teachers across North Dakota. Three themes emerged as shared positive factors that led rural North Dakota teachers to long-staying status in their schools. Even though every participant mentioned a drawback to working in a rural area, they were perceived as small annoyances rather than a reason to step away. Participant V sums up how she felt about working in a small North Dakota school.

      I don't know if I would work anywhere else besides a small school because you know the

      kids when they walk in the door, we, as a staff, stand at the front door, greeting kids

every morning as they come. They know that if they have any issues, we're there for

them.

This sentiment of passion and commitment to her small school spoke volumes relating to her

experiences of working as an educator in rural North Dakota. All things considered, the

participants mainly described favorable experiences while employed in a rural North Dakota

school. Chapter Five presents the results and discussion related to the phenomenon. Additionally,

the researcher's interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations

for action, and further research on the topic are covered. Finally, the study concludes with

researcher reflections.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

Overview

Teacher retention has been studied across the globe to understand why some educators persevere in the field compared to those choosing to leave the profession. This chapter highlights an in-depth discussion of the results, conclusions, and an interpretation of the findings. Moreover, the researcher covers implications for social change, recommendations for action and further research, the limitations, and the researcher's reflections to conclude this chapter and the study.

The multifaceted phenomenon of teacher retention in a rural North Dakota school was examined for this particular research. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the importance of qualitative research as it describes a complex issue. Specifically, this chapter emphasizes the researcher's interpretation of the results and recommendations.

Understanding the factors that influence teachers to become long-staying members in rural schools is important to explore. With the discouraging rates of teacher turnover and attrition, school administrators are caught in the cyclical pattern of filling vacancies within their schools. North Dakota is not immune to the shortage, and the researcher felt the literature lacks research specific to the state (see Chapter 1, p.7). Many studies focus on why teachers leave, whereas this study sought to understand the positive reasons they choose to stay.

The researcher employs a qualitative phenomenological study to understand fully the feelings associated with rural educator experiences in North Dakota. This framework set the tone for discovering first-hand the reality of rural teachers and is recommended by Creswell (1998) as the researcher aspires to understand the meanings of human experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) explicitly described phenomenological research as a representation of data partly based

on participants' perspectives and partly based on the researcher's interpretation. In addition, Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that the researcher should compare the findings with the literature and theoretical frameworks to adequately capture the essence of the findings. The researcher parallels Creswell and Poth's work by following the phenomenological approach and subsequent protocols.

Two broad research questions guide this study:

RQ1: What factors contribute to the retention of experienced teachers in rural North Dakota?

RQ2: What are the commonalities among teachers who remain employed in a rural North Dakota school district?

These two questions, although quite simple, generated a vast amount of data to sufficiently and comprehensively answer the questions. Seven rural teachers participated in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 58 minutes in length.

The researcher followed Giorgi's (1976) method of data analysis, which is a widely-used, research-based approach of analysis for phenomenological studies. Whiting (2013) explained the meaning behind Giorgi's method, which is the "uncovering of true meanings, the searching of irrefutable truth" (p. 72). It was essential to follow a sequential method to ensure a thorough examination was conducted for this study. Completing an audit trail also verified the analysis process was executed under ethical, genuine, and credible practices.

The overall findings of the research include three overarching themes: connectedness and personalized relationships, various rural conditions, and administrator support and colleague mentorship. The trio of themes creates working conditions conducive to longevity and feelings of career satisfaction for rural teachers in North Dakota (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Rural North Dakota Teacher Retention Factors
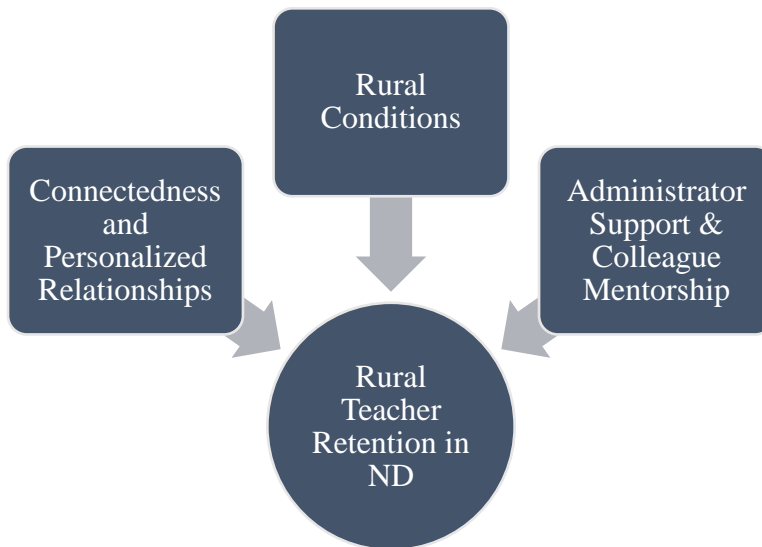
Interpretations of the Findings

Theoretical Frameworks

An interpretation of the findings was framed through the social constructivism and teacher career cycle theories. Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that the researcher must rely on the participant's views to make sense of the findings. Each participants' experiences are unique to their social environment, thus following Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism paradigm. Based on the available data, the two frameworks should intertwine to determine the reality of working in a rural North Dakota school. The statement below accurately describes the influence of an individuals' social environment on a teacher's career cycle. Steffy et al. (2000) explicitly stated:

The phases are progressive and influenced by a variety of factors, such as individual

development and social context. Consistent with a constructivist view of learning,

however, the most significant mechanism impelling growth in this model is choice. (p. 3)

A teacher's career cycle also frames this study as long-staying teachers feel more

confident in their pedagogical practices. Scholars acclaim teacher experience leads to increased

student outcomes (Bellwether Education Partners, 2016). Specifically, classroom experience

beyond five years is critical to reaching the phenomenon's essence. As identified through the

teacher career cycles, choosing teachers beyond their novice years yields educators who are more

assured in their teaching conventions, experiment with new strategies, collaborate with

colleagues, and reflect on their instructional practices (Huberman, 1989; Steffy & Wolfe, 2001).

Novice teachers were intentionally excluded as there is no guarantee they will transform into

long-staying teachers.

Comparison to Previous Literature

An extensive literature review served as the foundation to understand the phenomenon of

rural teacher retention. Previous researchers' scholarly work discovered several conditions as

factors of retention. To best understand retention, it is imperative to discern why there is a

shortage in the first place. Federal policy has been one of the most notable characteristics

affecting teacher retention in schools across the country (Jacobsen, 2013). The passing of NCLB

and ESSA (see Chapter 2, p. 22-24) had meaningful intent; however, rural schools felt burdened

by the mandated requirements and struggled to meet the provisions (Johnson et al., 2014).

Additionally, the review of the literature revealed retention factors in rural areas as

salary, administrative support, induction/mentoring programs, and working conditions. This

study discovered numerous determinants leading seven teachers to remain in rural North Dakota.

A comparison between this study and previous literature uncovers several similarities and one

notable difference.

Theme 1: Teachers value connectedness and personalized relationships.

A reoccurring, prominent theme in this study was the relationships between teachers and

their students and families. Recent research validates that quality parent-teacher relationships can

lead to increased academic and behavioral outcomes (Garbacz et al., 2016; Minke et al., 2014).

Furthermore, Watts's study (2016) disclosed the value of student relationships; comparatively,

student relationships were mentioned by all seven participants in this research study.

Connectedness and relationships are the building blocks of any institution. One might ascertain

these connections make life predictable and comfortable for rural teachers; therefore, they

choose to stay.

Theme 2: Teachers value rural conditions.

Rural factors, such as small class sizes, fewer behavior challenges, and teacher autonomy,

brought about career satisfaction in this study and various others' research (Kearney, 1994;

Monk, 2007; Osterholdm et al., 2006). This study also found that those brought up in a rural area

were more likely to seek employment in a small school. Again, one might presume the

community atmosphere and comfort level in a small town leads teachers to pursue that

environment in their adult lives.

Theme 3: Teachers value administrative support and colleague mentorship.

Another similar finding between this study and the existing literature was the value of

administrative support and mentorship (Bland et al., 2014). Noting the exodus rates are

incredibly high within the first few years of teaching, the offer of assistance and guidance

influences the teacher's career cycle and decision to continue teaching (Anderson, 2014; Picucci,

2016). As teachers expressed the support received from their colleagues, there appeared a harmonious balance of mentorship interwoven with personal relationships reinforcing the value of colleagues in the workplace.

The comparison of this study's findings to previous research resulted in mostly consistent findings on the topic of teacher retention in rural areas. Although salary was found as a factor related to teacher retention in the literature review, the results indicate no evidence of salary as a retention factor. North Dakota leaders have worked hard to increase wages for all teachers, thus making this a moot point for educators. Additionally, extracurricular assignments are paid positions and potentially make up any salary differential. As shown above, this study's results aligned with other researchers' work; therefore, supporting congruity between similar studies.

Rural Teaching Challenges

The literature also revealed disadvantages to working in rural schools. Even though this study did not feature the unfavorable conditions of rural employment, the participants reported multiple drawbacks. Some of the pitfalls noted in previous research are feelings of isolation, a lack of resources, and a more significant workload (Lyles, 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004). Comparatively, these are similar to the participants' responses for this study. Even though the difficulties did not alter the participants' decisions to remain in the classroom, administrators should note the challenges experienced and make efforts to eliminate or diminish them.

Summary

Several conclusions emerged from the results of this study. Since retention factors in rural North Dakota are similar in size and community culture, the researcher hypothesizes that the results are generalizable for schools of comparable size. It is possible to generalize the results to rural schools outside of the state by comparing their district characteristics to those from this

study, such as rural conditions, district size, and administrative support, and thoroughly evaluate their similarities.

Another conclusion derived from the study is the collective nature of career satisfaction and the participants' desire to remain in a rural area. Furthermore, all participants expressed favorable outcomes of rural employment based on the development of solid relationships, rural conditions (small class sizes, fewer behavioral challenges, teacher autonomy, community ties, rural upbringing, and extracurricular assignments), and support and mentorship from administration and colleagues.

Implications for Social Change

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

The results postulate building strong relationships as a critical factor in teacher satisfaction, which appears to lead to longevity. Administrative staff can address this construct by creating a culture within the school to facilitate relationship building. A strong 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 on social-emotional learning, understanding poverty, and supporting multicultural populations.

School leaders might also evaluate their hiring practices through the application, interviewing, and hiring processes. Principals and superintendents may include reflective

questions in the application, followed by asking meaningful interview questions. The application

questions assist hiring staff in determining the best candidate for their rural North Dakota school.

This list of potential questions (see Appendix C) offers insight into the applicant's desire to work

in a rural school. If the district is fortunate enough to have multiple candidates, the hiring staff

can vet the responses and choose the best-matched applicants to interview. The interview

process, with specific questions, further establishes whether or not the candidate possesses the

characteristics that align with factors that are determinants in long-staying teachers in North

Dakota. For a list of potential interview questions, see Appendix D.

Recommendations for Action

The researcher endorses four recommendations for action gleaned from the research

findings: targeted professional development, asking specific application and interview questions,

requiring a mentor, and an individually designed district summary (see Table 6). The four

recommendations originate from the researcher based on her experience working in a rural

community and most recently as an administrator, alongside the extensive findings of this study.

Table 6

Table of Recommended Actions

Recommendations	Responsible Party
Offer targeted professional development opportunities to support building relationships	Principal and Superintendent
Create a set of application and interview questions to identify applicants that exhibit similar characteristics to long-staying rural teachers	Principal, Superintendent, and Hiring Committee Members
Teachers are assigned a mentor their first year with the district	Principal and Mentor Teachers

Document created will highlight the positive attributes of working in a rural school	Principal and Superintendent

Note: *Recommendations for Action with Responsible Parties*

The first recommendation is based on the notion that 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. Considering relationships within an educational setting are essential, this recommendation may increase career satisfaction amongst teachers in the field.

The second recommendation includes rethinking the hiring practices in a rural community by writing precise application (see Appendix C) and interview questions (see Appendix D). These planned questions can assist the hiring team in identifying quality candidates with characteristics found to be indicators of rural teacher retention in North Dakota. The application process is the first line of vetting candidates' responses to identify those to interview. Those on the hiring committee should carefully evaluate the responses to ensure they are interviewing the best applicants for their rural community. Secondly, the interview questions can further determine whether or not a rural environment is suitable for the candidate. There is no guarantee that specific questions on either the application or the interview will lead to long-staying teachers; however, it is possible to match candidates that value and appreciate a rural environment.

The third recommendation 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 toward longevity.

Lastly, the researcher recommends that districts create a one-page summary highlighting the positive attributes of working in their school. A staff survey will identify the favorable characteristics of working in a rural school and general statistics associated with the district and community. As part of the application process, the summary will be available for potential applicants to view, illuminating the benefits of working in the district. Items to include in this district overview might consist of average class size, behavioral data, quotes from practicing teachers, community activities, extracurricular activities offered, or other promising aspects relative to their unique district. Additionally, district staff will utilize this synopsis to welcome new families to the district or those transferring into their district. See Appendix E for an example of a school summary.

Recommendations for Further Study

Teacher retention has been a concern studied by many, and with the rates of departure hovering around 40 to 50 percent, it should continue to be explored. The researcher proposes further research with long-staying urban teachers in the state. The researcher wonders whether this population of teachers would express similar positive factors for remaining in a career many choose to leave. Teacher retention has been a 'topic of interest' for decades, and administrators,

whether urban or rural, seek to find strategies that will provide a social environment conducive to longevity.

As an administrator, the researcher seeks to understand the reported retention factor of administrative support and its meaning to teachers in the field. This study did not uncover what 'support' meant to the participants. Additional research on the constructs that make up administrative support deepens the understanding of principal and superintendent actions deemed helpful and supportive and those that lead to teachers' feelings of career satisfaction.

The researcher is also interested in administrations' perceptions on teacher retention in rural North Dakota. Considering the principal hires teaching staff and sees teachers come and go, their perceptions might prove beneficial to understanding the complex phenomenon of teacher retention. A principal's viewpoint may provide insight into the practices that are helpful or unsuccessful in retaining teachers.

Finally, the researcher is also interested in the constructs of small class sizes and fewer classroom behaviors. Participant D shares, "you have less behavior issues, likely because of the smaller classes." This participant presumes smaller class sizes lead to fewer behavioral challenges. The researcher wonders if there is a correlation between the two and how those conditions might be replicated.

Limitations

This study provides a comprehensive representation of long-staying rural teachers in North Dakota but lacks generalizability to other rural schools across the nation. Although not impossible to duplicate the conditions that exist in North Dakota to other states, it could prove challenging. Another limitation of the study is the gender representation of participants. In North Dakota, 23.6 percent of teachers are male, and 76.4 percent are females in rural schools

throughout the state (Shockley, 2021). The study's participants consisted of one male and six females, constituting 14 percent male representation and 86 percent female. To accurately correspond to the state's gender makeup of teachers, another male participant would have been advantageous to the study. Finally, this study's sample size was relatively small, whereas a larger sample size may offer additional data to support the identification of teacher retention factors.

Researcher Reflection

The purpose of this research was to determine experienced teachers' feelings and perceptions associated with continued employment in a rural North Dakota school district and to fill the literature gap on the topic. The results confirm teachers strongly value their personalized relationships with students, families, and their colleagues. Secondly, several unique rural conditions support teachers' decisions to become long-staying in a rural community. Lastly, they find the support they receive from their administration and their colleagues as a retention factor. Moreover, the researcher feels this study fills the gap in the literature on teacher retention specific to rural areas in North Dakota.

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. Even though the researcher currently works in an urban district, this study's theme of connectedness and personalized relationships is transferable to any size district. 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 is also curious about the participants' verbalized experiences of fewer behavioral challenges in their schools. Pianta and Allen (2018) explicitly stated, "Students are

more likely to follow the rules if they have a robust connection with their teachers" (p.1). This quote leads the researcher to ponder the correlation between student behavior and the relationships between teachers and their students. Based on this study's results and the statement above, one might ascertain the efficacy of strengthening and prioritizing relationships with students.

In a broader sense, the researcher found great enjoyment and satisfaction in the research process. This project is the maiden study of the researcher who hopes it will not be the last. An intensive study, such as this dissertation, paves the way for further research on this topic. The researcher started in education 18 years ago and has held a number of roles during that time. She anticipates she will remain in education for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the researcher needs to share this study with others in the field. One avenue to distribute the data is to present the findings at the North Dakota Council for Educational Leaders (NDCEL) conference. This professional development opportunity is held two times per calendar year and brings together educational leaders from across the state. Additionally, the researcher hopes to publish this work or subsequent research on the topic.

Conclusion

This qualitative, hermeneutical phenomenological study identified the factors that lead rural teachers to become long-staying. Seven semi-structured interviews with questions that align with the two research questions support three overarching themes. These themes emerge as reasons teachers choose to continue their employment in a rural North Dakota school. The data suggest a need for additional research on teacher retention and opportunities to improve the conditions that lead to retention.

The researcher finds the benefit of a workplace environment that encourages connection and a culture that values and fosters relationships. However, there is not one magic factor that 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.

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Appendix A: Copy of the Interview Protocol and Questions

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

Introduction to the study and welcome participant

1. Thank you for taking the time to participate in my research study. The purpose of this study is to gather thoughts and experiences of why teachers remain teaching in a rural school in North Dakota. All data collected and analyzed will be kept confidential with no disclosure of any identifying characteristics. This interview process should take approximately 45-60 minutes. Do you have any questions before I begin recording the interview?
2. Present the informed consent and have participant sign.
3. The interview questions will begin.

Main Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How long have you worked in this rural district? Or how many years cumulatively have you worked in a district smaller than 1000 students?
2. What is your current position?
3. Do you have an extracurricular assignment in the district?
4. How did you come to work in the current rural district?
5. Describe some of the positive thoughts, experiences, or feelings that you have about working in a rural school?
6. Describe the characteristics that influenced your decision to remain teaching in a rural school?
7. What do you value most about working in a rural school?
8. What are some specific factors that have contributed to these positive thoughts/experiences/feelings?
9. What is the most important aspect your teaching job has contributed to your life? To your school? To the community?
10. Describe any external factors (conditions outside of the school) that have contributed to your longevity in the district?
11. What do you find rewarding in your current position?
12. What do you find challenging in your current position?
13. Considering everything we have discussed, overall, what is keeping you here in the current district?
14. Have you ever considered leaving the rural school environment? If so, what factors changed your mind?
15. Do you have any other comments related to working in a rural school that we have not covered?

Conclusion

1. Do you have any additional questions?
2. Turn off recording device.
3. Thank the participant for their participation in study.

Appendix B: Detailed Participant Descriptions

Participant Descriptions

Participant S

Participant S has 32 years of classroom experience, primarily in third grade. Her school is located on a Native American Reservation, which offers representation for this study, considering the Native American population comprises 10 percent of North Dakota students (Insights, 2021). This participant grew up and was raised in the community in which she has taught for three decades.

Participant D

Participant D, the only male participant, has been a social studies instructor for nine years, with eight in his current district. His first teaching assignment was also in a rural North Dakota school; however, his student-teaching experience in a large school offers a diverse perspective for this study. It was essential to the researcher to include a male perspective in this study. It is important to note this participant grew up in a rural area and attended a small school in Montana, and it was his college football career that brought him to the state.

Participant T

Participant T is a long-staying 6th-grade teacher in Region 4 who has been with the district since 1993. She has 30 years of total experience in rural North Dakota schools. Her husband also teaches in the same district but at the high school level. She values the extra-curricular options for students and continues to coach volleyball because she does not want to see the program dissipate.

Participant B

Participant B is a middle and high school English teacher with 22 years of experience in rural North Dakota schools. Her first teaching position was on a Native American Reservation, and the last 21 years have been in a Region 5 school. She values the small community feel and the relationships with students and friends that can be built because of the size.

Participant A

Participant A has 27 years of elementary experience across three different rural schools in North Dakota. She prefers lower elementary and has spent most of her career in first grade. Participant A was raised in Minnesota and secured her first teaching job in a rural North Dakota school in the Region 6 area. Her husband is also in education and serves as an administrator in a district nearby. With her years of experience, she understands her salary would be substantially higher in a larger district. However, she values her small school and intends to work in the rural school until retirement.

Participant C

Participant C has the least amount of rural school experience with eight years between two rural school districts. She enjoys the rural community as she grew up in rural North Dakota. She plans on staying in a rural school as she wants her son to enjoy the benefits of a small school. Participant C treasures the student, parent, and collegial relationships that she has built while in a rural community.

Participant V

Participant V has 21 years of experience, all in a rural area. Her first teaching position was in a very small rural school where she taught a 1st/2nd-grade combination class. Due to low enrollment, the school closed. After marrying a local farmer/rancher, she accepted a teaching

position in a nearby town but still in Region 8. She reports that she will retire from her current

school, provided their enrollment remains stable.

Appendix C: Potential Application Questions

1. Explain the value of relationships in your educational practice.

2. Describe a time when a peer or colleague supported you.

3. Explain the meaningful attributes of working in a rural school.

4. Describe your ideal working conditions.

5. What role does your administrator play in your support system?

Appendix D: Potential Interview Questions

Questions related to connectedness and relationships:

1. Describe how you build relationships with students over time.

2. How might you develop family and parent relationships?

3. How would you build relationships with your colleagues outside of your content area?

Questions related to rural conditions:

1. Would you be interested in any extracurricular assignments, and if so, what appeals to you?

2. What do you perceive as benefits to working in a rural community?

3. Small schools often rely on community support; how might you get involved in the community?

Questions related to support and mentorship

1. You will be in a single section school, so as you encounter challenges in your classroom, describe your process for seeking support and assistance?

2. Mentorship is important for any new teacher to the field or a new school. What would a successful mentorship program look like to you?

Appendix E: District Summary

Welcome to the Rural County School District #31

Home of the Tigers

Rural County School District Fast Facts

★ Average class size 15

★ Two full-time principals

★ K-12 located in one building

★ District pays both sides of teacher retirement

★ Strong Parent/Teacher Organization

★ Professional development opportunities every month

★ Mentorship opportunities

★ Family educational events

Rural County Community Fast Facts

★ Outdoor pool (zero entry and 50 ft slide)

★ Weekly Burgers in the Park events from April until October

★ Outdoor movies in the summer

★ Opportunities to join local organizations

Click the link below for Tiger athletic, fine arts, & club schedule

SCHEDULE

Click the link below for the Rural County Community Activity schedule

SCHEDULE

Superintendent: Dr. Smith

Elementary Principal Mr. Brown

Secondary Principal Mrs. Lander