

# Why Teachers Stay: Shaping a New Narrative on Rural Teacher Retention

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*Teacher retention studies often focus on why teachers leave the profession, but this article suggests that focusing on why teachers stay situates rural school and community assets as the foundation to reform. The research design is a collective case study of three rural Wisconsin school districts, and findings are based on interviews and focus groups with 44 teachers and six administrators. Our study's findings reveal the centrality of relationships to teachers' decisions to stay in their rural schools. We present four relationship categories: (a) commitment to students, (b) opportunities for leadership and collaboration, (c) connections to community, and (d) personal and professional ties. Our study suggests the need for a conceptual reframing, or a new way of thinking, in research on teacher retention. Practical implications for addressing rural teacher retention are also surfaced, suggesting a new way of "doing" that situates school-community relationships at the center.*

Developing and maintaining a stable teacher workforce has been a central concern for policymakers, researchers, and educational leaders since the standardization of schooling in the early 20th century (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Cubberley, 1922; Tyack, 1974). Factors underlying staffing shortages include the high number of teachers who leave positions in their current schools and those who leave the profession entirely, the decreasing number of teacher applicants on the job market who can fill these vacancies, and the difficulties of retaining teachers with appropriate professional credentials (García & Weiss, 2020). While these trends are national, the teacher labor market is also highly localized (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Reiningger, 2012; Sutchter et al., 2016), meaning that geographic proximity and familiarity are key components in decision making both on the part

of prospective teachers (Boyd et al., 2005) and by school districts (Engel & Cannata, 2015).

A broad range of scholarship on teacher shortage and attrition offers a deficit construction of teachers' work by drawing attention to what particular schools and teachers lack, both in financial resources and human capital. Similarly, media attention to the problems and deficits of rural communities (Biddle & Hall, 2017; Tieken & Williams, 2021) coincides with the difficulty of recruiting and retaining educators to live and work in rural areas. In this article we intentionally shift the focus of teacher retention research to why teachers *stay*, offering a change in this narrative that situates rural school and community assets as the foundation of reform.

## Study Rationale

We draw upon data from a broader study of rural teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention in Wisconsin and apply an asset-based framework to illuminate the influence of classroom, school, and community on rural teacher retention. In many ways, Wisconsin offers a context that reflects the national trends in teacher shortage and attrition—e.g., declining teacher preparation enrollment numbers (Yeado, 2016), less relative pay for teachers than other college-educated professions in the state, and

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the use of alternative pathways for licensure (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction [WDPI], 2016). The state also offers key divergences from national trends, including high levels of local school financial support from taxpayers (Wisconsin Policy Forum, 2020), the contentious end of collective bargaining with teachers' unions (Umhoefer & Hauer, 2016), and the subsequent design of local district compensation policies. In this differentiated landscape, rural school districts struggle to offer attractive salaries and incentives that can compete with wealthier urban and suburban districts, and even with neighboring rural districts (WDPI, 2016). In our study, we situate these contextual factors within the experiences and perspectives of rural teachers.

Recently, Gallo (2020) and Tran et al. (2020) called for an authentic and balanced representation of the advantages and challenges of working and living in rural communities as a way to honestly situate the problems of teacher recruitment and retention. This article addresses this call by illuminating the myriad and deep connections between rural schools and communities and the influence of this relationship on sustaining a quality and committed rural teacher workforce. Our analysis is guided by these questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualize why they remain teaching in their rural school?
2. What personal, school, and community factors influence their reasoning?

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

The following review of literature explores the relationship between rural schools and their communities, particularly as it relates to teacher retention. First, we discuss the challenges associated with school staffing broadly and consider specific factors that influence teacher attrition. Second, we consider the characteristics of rural communities that create unique challenges for teacher recruitment and retention. Third, we describe the spheres of influence framework that undergirds our analysis.

### **Teacher Turnover Trends**

While the teacher workforce in the United States is made up of a significant number of veteran teachers, novice teachers form the largest percentage of teachers who exit the profession. More than 44% of new teachers leave the workforce within the first five years, with the highest rates of teacher turnover in rural and urban high-poverty, high-minority schools (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Furthermore, in a recent report, Ingersoll et al. (2018) found that first-year teachers reference dissatisfaction, family and personal concerns, and school staffing decisions as

reasons for leaving the profession. The broad category of "dissatisfaction" includes school and working conditions such as salary, student behavior, accountability, resources for classroom use, professional development opportunities, school leadership, and decision-making input.

For rural schools, staffing difficulties vary depending on geographic location and teaching assignment, but they often include the wide range of responsibilities for educators beyond classroom teaching, a lack of appropriate materials, professional isolation, deteriorating building conditions, poor school leadership, and limited professional privacy available in a small community (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Hammer et al., 2005; Lazarev et al., 2017). Rural schools often have limited ability to compete on initial salary offers or keep pace with salary increases in urban and suburban districts (Osterholm et al., 2006), and turnover is especially high in small and remote districts (Monk, 2007). Additionally, housing shortage in rural areas is often cited as a barrier to attracting and retaining teachers (Miller, 2012; Osterholm et al., 2006). Given this entwined relationship between rural community and school district, typical supply and demand explanations of the rural teacher labor market are inadequate in developing solutions to recruitment and retention challenges.

### **Rural Complexity**

In juxtaposition with national data on teacher turnover, community context emerges as a significant factor in rural teacher recruitment and retention. For example, many rural schools, particularly in the Upper Midwest and New England, struggle with community depopulation and related declining student enrollment (Cox et al., 2014; Johnson, 2006). In these communities, limited resources and smaller budgets based on the number of enrolled students and a dwindling tax base affect the ability of rural schools to serve the academic needs of their students and remain viable in a competitive educational market (Seelig, 2017a). Given the place-based nature of economic and social inequalities, rural school challenges related to student enrollment and teacher staffing have the same root causes as community population decline and issues of attracting new residents and businesses to rural communities (Seelig, 2017b; Reid et al., 2010).

A number of studies indicate teacher satisfaction in rural areas is linked to the family-like atmosphere of small schools and positive relationships with students and their families (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Davis, 2002; Gallo, 2020; Rooks, 2018; Ulferts, 2016), but due to similar characteristics, teacher dissatisfaction in rural schools is often linked to taking on numerous roles (Biddle & Azano, 2016), providing instruction across multiple grade levels or subjects (Zost, 2010), and professional isolation

(Miller, 2012; Monk, 2007). The blurring of personal and professional spheres is also raised as a concern for attracting new teachers to small and remote schools, yet Rooks (2018) suggests the significance of relationships between teachers and long-time community residents is an important factor in teacher retention. In a recent study (Gallo, 2020), the development of a “professional family” among teachers in a rural school offered a counterbalance to the difficulties of rural teaching. A “sense of community within the school” (Gallo, 2020, p. 8) was a significant factor in preventing frequent turnover common among isolated rural schools.

### **Spheres of Influence**

To better understand these dichotomous characteristics influencing rural teacher retention we turned to Ulferts (2016) and predecessors (Boylan et al., 1993; Davis, 2002) who conducted survey research on teacher retention in diverse rural contexts. Boylan et al. (1993) conducted the initial study with 1,100 rural teachers in New South Wales, Australia, which led to the creation of a rural teacher retention model that identified four “spheres of influence”: family/personal, within classroom, whole school, and community. Over the following two decades, Davis (2002) and Ulferts (2016) developed surveys that incorporated these spheres of influence to study teacher recruitment and retention in rural Montana and Illinois schools, respectively. Both studies mirrored the findings in Boylan et al. (1993), concluding that “community” and “within classroom” spheres were most influential in teachers’ decisions to remain teaching in their rural schools. Bringing together the spheres of influence conceptual framing and the attention to rural complexity in teacher pipeline research suggests a need for closer examination of the relationship between rural school and community. Our study builds upon the findings from these survey-based studies to qualitatively explore why teachers stay in rural schools.

### **Method**

Our research design is a collective case study (Stake, 1995) that explores the phenomenon of rural teacher recruitment and retention in more than one school district context. We selected a sample of rural school districts in Wisconsin that allowed us to understand how “different people experience particular situations and how issues might affect practices across sites” (Compton-Lilly, 2013, p. 56). Our research design was emergent and process oriented (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), and the flexibility of our methods allowed for maximum participation in each school district.

### **Data Collection**

Our study includes both purposeful sampling for the school district<sup>1</sup> (i.e., case) selections and convenience sampling for the teacher (i.e., participant) sampling. The school district sites function as the unit of analysis through which the comparative process was conducted, while individual teachers in each school district form the units of observation upon which the case narratives were developed. Teachers’ insights and experiences thus formed the foundation of the school district storylines and provided perspective on the larger picture of teacher recruitment and retention (Maynes et al., 2008). In other words, the teachers were the actors who deepened our engagement with geopolitical and socioeconomic factors that shaped retention in each school district case by providing first-hand experiences and reflections on these broader influences.

### **District Identification**

The selection of three rural school districts emerged from coordinated conversations between researchers and rural educators as part of a series of university-based events that highlighted rural Wisconsin. The goal of this event series was to elevate the voices of rural teachers in collaborative settings with researchers, preservice teachers, legislators, and rural school advocates. The participation of 16 teachers in the event series allowed us to develop deeper connections with these teachers and the 12 districts where they were employed. These districts represented the diversity of rural districts in Wisconsin based on student demographics, state report card data, and geographic diversity (i.e., type of rural economy, location in the state). To begin data collection for this study, we emailed these 16 teachers to ask them to participate. We received overwhelming interest from teachers, and they connected us with their administrators to discuss participation in the study. Of the initial 11 districts that responded, three were selected for site visits that offered diversity in terms of location, community economy, and student demographics.

### **Participant Selection**

In each district we scheduled site visits wherein we adopted a convenience sampling approach to within-district teacher participation. Convenience sampling allowed for a wide range of participants with differing personal and professional characteristics that are important for translating

<sup>1</sup> Two of our school district cases each have one K–12 campus, and the other district has two campuses (elementary and middle/high). For this reason, we consider the district as the case though it is often synonymous with the school. Throughout the article, we use “school” and “school district” interchangeably.

the results of the study. For example, 25 of the teachers were residents of their district, and six teachers were once students in their districts. Most participants self-identified as female (72.3%) and White (97.7%), reflecting the overall composition of a vastly White teacher workforce in rural Wisconsin (Yeado, 2016), despite an increasingly-diverse student population (Showalter et al., 2017). Table 1 provides further characteristics of the teachers who participated in the study, including their average years of teaching experience and time working in the district.

### *Interviews and Focus Groups*

We conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to construct the three rural district cases. We solicited interested teachers with a flyer which our teacher contacts distributed by email and scheduled interviews during participants' lunch hours and prep periods. In the largest district, we visited each of the three schools and were approached by several additional interested participants once on site in the teachers' lounge. This process resulted in

individual interviews with teachers throughout the school day, at their convenience, and based solely upon their interest in speaking with us. Alternatively, in the two smaller districts, the visits were designed and scheduled in advance by the district administrator to align with their school schedules. In both of these districts, we mainly conducted focus groups with three to five teachers each, by grade band, though we also conducted individual interviews with a few teachers who did not easily fit into a focus group time. Table 1 provides the frequency of interviews and focus groups.

Teacher interview questions were intentionally open-ended and prompted participants to share their experiences and perspectives on multiple topics, including their perception of prominent community characteristics, personal and professional histories in relation to their current employment, the identification of challenges in the workplace, and what knowledge would be of most use to a novice teacher who wished to work in their school. We also interviewed school and district administrators in each district to triangulate with the teachers' perceptions as well as to deepen our understanding of local practices

**Table 1**

*Participants: Teachers and Administrators*

	Overall		Galena Ridge		Timber Lake		Riverbend	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Teacher participants								
Total teacher participants	44		16		17		11	
Teacher individual interviews	18		16		1		1	
Teachers in focus groups	26		0		16		10	
Grade level								
Middle or high school	15	34.1	4	25.0	5	29.4	3	27.3
Elementary school	17	38.6	6	37.5	7	41.2	5	45.5
Special education	5	11.4	2	12.5	1	5.9	2	18.2
District wide <sup>a</sup>	4	9.1	2	12.5	4	23.5	1	9.1
Reading or literacy specialist	3	6.8	2	12.5	0	0.0	0	0.0
Residency/alumni status								
Resident of district	25	56.8	9	56.3	10	58.8	6	54.5
Former student in district	6	13.6	2	12.5	3	17.6	1	9.1
Teaching experience								
Average years of experience	15.7		15.7		17.2		12.3	
Average years of working in the district	10.9		13.1		9.0		10.6	
Administrator interviews								
Total administrator participants	6		3		1		2	
Superintendent	2		1 <sup>b</sup>		1 <sup>c</sup>		0	
Principal	4		2		0		2	

<sup>a</sup> Educators who worked in roles across the district such as an art, music, physical education, or library media specialist.

<sup>b</sup> At the time of the interviews, the superintendent in Galena Ridge was also serving as the high school principal.

<sup>c</sup> The district superintendent was the only administrator for the entire district, meaning he served as the elementary, middle, and high school principal.

and policies associated with teacher retention. Teacher focus groups addressed the same topics as the individual interviews, yet the focus group protocol was designed to prompt discussion among teachers. All teacher participants also filled out a confidential demographic survey with professional and personal information (e.g., licensure/credentials, preparation program, years of service, gender, and race).

Interviews ranged from 30–60 minutes, and focus groups were 60–75 minutes in length. Audio recordings of interviews and focus groups were transcribed, and participant names were replaced with pseudonyms. Teachers signed a consent form that indicated whether they were comfortable with our use of identifying characteristics such as grade level and subject taught without using their names. This added consent permitted the use of these characteristics so that data made sense to the study’s audience outside the research site while still allowing for confidentiality.

### Data Analysis

All transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were uploaded to a qualitative analysis software program. Our coding manual was primarily organized into categories derived from the larger study’s research questions (e.g., community attributes, teacher challenges, the role of school) and components of teacher development (e.g., college and preservice training, hiring, professional development, recruitment). The codebook was iteratively constructed as we applied preliminary codes to representative transcripts and revised code definitions and categories as needed. The initial coding process also prompted inclusion of *in vivo* codes (Miles et al., 2014) that emerged as focal points in participant reflections. We maintained coding journals for emerging thoughts and questions and developed multiple analytic memos to guide the secondary coding processes. It was in this first round of coding that why teachers remained teaching in their schools surfaced as a necessary shift in our analysis.

Therefore, we engaged in a round of structural coding (Saldaña, 2016) through the application of theoretical codes based on the spheres of influences (Boylan et al., 1993; Davis, 2002; Ulferts, 2016) in rural teacher recruitment and retention. At this stage, we layered the following codes onto our initially-coded data: family/personal, within classroom, whole school, and community. We then reorganized coded data by district in relation to each sphere of influence in a conceptually ordered matrix, which facilitated internal comparison across participants within each school district and a partially ordered meta-matrix for cross-case comparison (Miles et al., 2014).

Finally, we paid explicit attention to the factors that teachers referenced as significant in their decision to remain

committed to teaching in their particular rural schools. We constructed a story of each district case based upon the teachers’ individual and collective experiences, surfacing key relationships between school and community. It is important to note that we did not originally design our study to address teacher retention as separate from teacher recruitment in rural schools, but our analysis of the data we collected urged us to move beyond the challenges associated with attracting and hiring new teachers to focus on the personal and professional experiences that influenced teachers in rural schools to stay in their positions.

### Positionality

We are both White women and former rural teachers. From our perspective, we believe that our identities as former rural teachers provided a connection with the participants in our study that allowed an entry point into their lives that may not typically be extended to community outsiders. Given the diversity of rural places and the varying cultures and economies that shape their existence, however, our past rural experiences afforded us an opportunity not typically available to urban residents and “ivory tower” researchers. In this way, we are neither “insider-researchers nor outsider-researchers” but “benefit from the advantages and minimize the potential barriers of one status or another” (Hamm, 2014, p. 92). Additionally, our identities reflect the racial and gender identities of the majority of our participants, which established a level of comfort and familiarity based on the perception of shared experiences. We suspect that these qualities helped to remove barriers to trust for our participants, although we acknowledge that our identities potentially influenced teacher responses as we participated in focus groups and interviews, sharing pieces of our own experiences to support camaraderie and further discussion.

### Limitations

There are several limitations in this study related to our research design. First, while the focus of this study emerged from ongoing outreach activities with rural teachers, we recognize that this approach limited our sample to teachers and district sites that had self-selected into a relationship with us. Second, since data collection was tailored to fit the needs of each school district, we opted to use a mix of focus groups and interviews, effectively limiting the comparative aspect of our design. Third, extensive member-checking with teachers is on hold due to the stress of teaching during a global health crisis. We intend to present our findings to teachers and administrators either via video conference call or in person once the school district administrators agree on a respectful time to do so. Fourth, our study was designed to illuminate teachers’ personal and professional experiences

in rural schools. However, to fully understand their role in these rural communities, understanding community members' (e.g., parents, business owners) perceptions of the school and teachers could provide triangulation with data from teachers and administrators that surfaces further concerns in attracting and retaining teachers. In naming these limitations along with our findings, we hope to inspire future studies that will explore this phenomenon using various methodologies and in diverse contexts.

### **Research Context**

In Wisconsin, 55% (233 of 424) of school districts are classified as rural (Kemp, 2016), providing education for 19% of the state's student population (Showalter et al., 2019). While rurality is often officially delineated as non-metro or classified as the residual areas outside urbanized regions, our study recognizes and affirms the sociocultural dimensions of rural life. The following school district descriptions reflect the ways rural educators understand and experience their rural schools and communities.

#### ***Galena Ridge***

Of the three school districts, Galena Ridge is located closest to an urban area and has the highest enrollment (750–800 students). The school district has a well-known academic reputation in the region, and many of the teachers graduated from a nearby university's teacher preparation program. Among the 16 teacher participants, two attended the school district as students themselves, five had been teaching in the district for over 20 years, and nine lived within the district boundaries. Additionally, four of the teachers to whom we spoke were in their first year of teaching in the district, though only two were novice teachers.

As one of the oldest districts in the state, the three school buildings are located in a town rich with memories of the mineral extraction industry and the legacy of agricultural production. Small family farms remain common across the surrounding countryside and a vibrant local arts scene supports galleries and community events. Teachers expressed concerns, however, about the limited employment options, lack of housing to attract new teachers and their families, and the persistent divide between families of varying socioeconomic statuses. While these concerns are common across the three districts, in Galena Ridge they emerged as afterthoughts to the general positivity and welcoming demeanor teachers attributed to the community.

#### ***Timber Lake***

Timber Lake has the smallest enrollment (140–150 students), and students are educated together in one building

nestled inside a national forest that spans the width of the state, making it the most remote district in our study. While small in number, a percentage of Timber Lake students identify as Native American, which is likely related to the close proximity of a federally recognized Native American reservation. The school district employs 19 teachers, with only one teacher per grade level or subject. Uniquely across the districts in our study, 53% of teacher participants had experience teaching before relocating to Timber Lake, including in the large city districts of Chicago and Milwaukee.

The local economy is based on outdoor tourism, and there is a significant population of seasonal homeowners with second homes. Teachers juxtaposed the affluent seasonal homeowners with the persistent poverty of permanent residents who often work multiple jobs in the service industry. The disconnection between community groups caused by this economic divide played out in the school district in the form of contentious school board meetings, public disputes over taxation, and the increasing costs of offering education in such a remote location. While these community divisions were related to economic use of the natural environment, teachers consistently pointed to the joys of living in a remote wooded area.

#### ***Riverbend***

Riverbend is also a single-building district, yet it is the smallest geographically in our study. Located in rolling hills of farmland only 40 miles from the Mississippi River, Riverbend incorporates several townships in their catchment area and enrolls 200–230 students. Of the three districts in this study, Riverbend enrolls the highest percentage of students who live in low-income households. The district employs only one teacher per grade level or subject and has the newest teaching staff. Collectively, teachers in Riverbend averaged just under six years of teaching in the district with an average of eight years teaching experience overall (WDPI, 2018). The teachers who participated in this study reflect slightly more years of experience overall and within the district, but seven of the 11 participants had been employed in the district for seven years or fewer.

Riverbend is largely an agricultural community made up of small farms, with the headquarters of an organic dairy company located on the fringes of town. However, the picturesque scenery masks economic and environmental devastation from the "hundred-year floods" that have recently occurred only a few years apart. The stories teachers and administrators shared about the floods served to illustrate both the community residents' care for each other and to explain the increasing residential poverty. Madeline, the elementary principal, referred to the absence of local agencies and social services as a troubling "poverty

of access” and discussed the school district’s crucial role as a service provider.

**Findings: Making Sense of *Staying***

In this section, we present four relationship categories that teachers repeatedly mentioned in discussing their school, community, and professional journeys. The relationships are grouped into these themes: (a) commitment to students, (b) opportunities for leadership and collaboration, (c) connections to community, and (d) personal and professional ties. The findings presented here remain intentionally close to the data, and we construct district cases of teacher retention based on these themes. We represent the most referenced characteristics as well as indicate district-spanning retention factors. Where helpful, we also include administrator perspectives to add further context in comparing cases. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings within each school district.

**Commitment to Students**

Across all three districts teachers described the classroom environment relationally, with a focus on their students. Teachers pointed to the nature of instruction as structured by the experiences of students, and the emphasis was consistently on having the ability to address student needs or interests—not specific academic outcomes. Possibly due to their reputation as a high-achieving rural district, teachers in Galena Ridge expressed commitment to helping students reach and achieve their goals while attending to the need to expand student awareness of the world beyond the community’s boundaries. For example, first-year elementary teacher Alicia combined her

instructional focus on literacy with a perceived student need to expand and diversify their knowledge:

One thing I try to strive for is to have cultural literacy and things like that because they all share very similar backgrounds. They’re all going to religion class together on Wednesday nights or dance, so they’re very much doing a lot of the same things, and their families look a lot alike, and their lives just are very much similar to each other.

Alicia’s quote illustrates how teachers in Galena Ridge perceived their role within a small rural community, especially the need to provide rich experiences for their students. The desire to expand opportunities for students appeared to be influential in teachers’ career decisions.

In Timber Lake, teachers also connected their instructional practice to the needs of school and student populations, but the freedom to structure class time without administrative oversight was referenced as key to meeting these needs. Middle school teachers Tina and Amelia discussed this opportunity at length.

Tina: The freedom we’ve been given... No one is hovering over you and telling you, “You’re doing this wrong,” or, “You should be doing this.” And in the 30 years I’ve been here, I’ve felt really respected that way. I’ve been able to have a lot of control over my curriculum.

Amelia: Yeah ... they’re very supportive of what you want to do in the classroom, and it’s nice in the aspect that when you find something that interests

**Table 2**  
*Summary of Findings*

	Galena Ridge	Timber Lake	Riverbend
Commitment to students	Provision of quality education and expansion of student experience	Curricular autonomy and pedagogical flexibility; teacher expertise	Awareness of student lives outside school and navigating impact
Opportunities for leadership and collaboration	Feeling heard and respected by school leaders; collaborative ethos	Teacher-initiated collaboration across grades and subjects; family ethos	Leadership opportunities for teacher growth; development ethos
Connections to community	Teachers feel embedded in the community; pride in district’s academic success	Community is divided by social class, yet the district is the center of activity for students and residents	Community and district are tightly knit and supportive of each other in the face of tragedy
Personal and professional ties	Reciprocity of support between teachers and families	The local natural environment provides opportunities to connect	Own children attending the school

the kids, you're able to gear your curriculum towards their wants and their interests, then, to help them be more successful.

The pedagogical flexibility and classroom autonomy discussed by Tina and Amelia is also rooted in the realities of teaching in Timber Lake's remote school community. Glenn, the district administrator, saw his support of teacher autonomy as an indication of their content expertise:

I am choosing one person to be the entire math department. Right? To teach math skills to a seven-year difference in age groups. If I choose the wrong person, I'm going to have seven generations of kids with poor math skills or poor reading skills.

Here, the district administrator in Timber Lake connects the quality of the teachers' instructional abilities and technical expertise to the academic success of students. Timber Lake teachers recognize this connection and foreground autonomy and flexibility as positive aspects of their classroom experiences.

Riverbend teachers also referenced being the sole grade level or subject teacher in their district. Due to the limited number of staff, teachers have the same students for their entire high school career. Bon, the high school history teacher, described this opportunity, and challenge, in detail:

We are a lot of people wearing a lot of different hats, because you want the kids to have everything. You want them to have as many classes as you can. So, as a high school teacher, you keep developing new ones. Or you add this or you teach this advanced or whatever. But you also want them to have drama and forensics and sports, and a trap shooting team and music. So, we all wear lots of different hats ... because if we don't take care of it, it doesn't get done.

However, Riverbend teachers also pointed to relationships with their students that went beyond academic experiences. With a student poverty rate of over 50% and repeated historic floods over the last several years, teachers remarked upon the social responsibilities the district has taken on within this adverse environment. Teachers are intimately aware of student experiences outside the classroom, which affects their instructional approach within the classroom. Allison, a high school science teacher, and Larry, a fifth-grade teacher, provided further detail:

Allison: Some of the struggle is that it is a high poverty area, and a lot of the challenges that go

on in high poverty areas, you see. It's not a big school, they're not anonymous...you see them and it's part of your classroom.

Larry: Yes, I saw that as a strength of here—knowing everybody, getting to know everybody; you know their families, you know what's going on. I think it makes you feel more sensitive when they are having behaviors—just because it is a small community, you pretty much know what's going on with most of the families, it's not a big secret.

Among all districts, the teachers' commitment to providing students with enriching opportunities was seen as a responsibility in their role as a rural educator. In Riverbend, teachers indicated that being a small school environment and knowing students and their families' experiences firsthand helped to shape their classroom dynamics, while in Galena Ridge and Timber Lake, classroom relationships often influenced course content and pedagogical emphasis.

### **Opportunities for Leadership and Collaboration**

In each district, teachers discussed the importance of supportive relationships with their colleagues and administrators as influencing their retention decisions. Teachers spoke positively about their opportunities for professional growth, discussing both the significance of a collaborative school culture and feeling respected by school leaders.

In Galena Ridge, teachers expressed feeling respected by school administrators and felt that their opinions influenced school improvement efforts. The district administration invested both time and resources in the maintenance of professional learning communities, and the teachers pointed to these collaborative spaces as "valued time." Noelle, a librarian in the district, noted the importance of administrative support:

They're not just saying, "Oh, you need to go ahead and figure out a way to make this happen." They are providing the tools in order to make it happen, so you have a lot of support here to do the work that needs to be done.

In each school building in Galena Ridge, the administrators were respected by the staff, and the feeling was mutual. Nathan, the elementary school principal, described his leadership style as focused on creating and sustaining a collaborative professional environment for teachers to grow their practice and to educate students to the best of their abilities. He explained:



So that's the big reason I came here—I had that freedom to build the staff capacity, kind of distributed leadership, because I'm not going to be around here forever. Neither are they. And so, if we can build that culture from the ground up, from the foundation, it's just a whole lot better.

Teachers discussed the opportunities provided by administrators as ways to develop their leadership skills. Karen, who teaches third grade and has been in the district for 30 years, remarked:

Our numbers are small, but yet if you step up and are serving on those committees, you help with the decision making and your opinion counts and you're on interview teams and deciding who's going to be part of your staff, who's going to be a good fit. Yes, they're asking a lot of us in a small district...but yet my opinion counts, and it's valued and I'm making a difference, not just for my kids but for the whole teaching community.

Taking on extra responsibility and knowing that the outcome would affect students and community resonated with teachers and created a district-wide atmosphere of shared work.

Teachers at Timber Lake also expressed satisfaction with collegial relations and a sense of teamwork. A distinct benefit of having all students under one roof in Timber Lake was the access to vertical alignment between adjacent grades. Teachers shared that they were able to align curriculum and discipline styles as well as coordinate their responses to the needs of individual students. The third grade and pre-k/kindergarten teachers provided detail:

Leslie: I would just say that working together, we do a lot together... I'm solely just third grade; it's helpful that we can turn to one another and help each other, build each other up. We work a lot together on little things, big things. And I just think that's really helpful to know that when you're small like that, there's going to be a lot more interaction than maybe if there were five third-grade [teachers]. You might have one-a-month meeting or something whereas we're kind of always building with one another.

Lilian: I think that leads into a strength we have, which is, he knows what I'm doing. You know what he's been doing. So we work on ... what we need to have the kids accomplish before they go to the next level. And I think we have more of

that connection than maybe a bigger school might because we discuss those things constantly.

Of course, the constant peer interactions in a small school environment come with some challenging moments as well. As Tina, the longest-serving teacher at Timber Lake, explained:

We're small. We're close. We call ourselves a family. Just like a family though, sometimes we don't get along. But we try to fix it. I think there are enough people that want to make it work that we do really well.

Unlike in Galena Ridge, professional learning communities and leadership opportunities were not referenced by teachers as reasons to remain in Timber Lake. Instead, in this extremely remote school environment where teachers have arrived from previous careers and other school districts to commit themselves to working and living in this small community, they expressed commitment to working at a school that embodies a sense of family.

Alternatively, the teaching staff in Riverbend is relatively new, and school administrators recognize this circumstance as an opportunity to attend to their staff's professional development needs and to offer opportunities for leadership. In contrast with Galena Ridge however, these professional development options are tied to increased compensation, which is not common in small, high-poverty districts. Madeline, the elementary principal—and former classroom teacher and reading specialist (all in Riverbend)—noted the intentionality of professional development in the district:

Our compensation model is completely tied to professional development, and we do really encourage teachers to seek, or to find leadership, like reading teacher, or reading specialist, or administrative programs to get that professional development. In a building like this, we like to talk about how every teacher really needs to be a teacher-leader.

Administrators are working creatively with what they have, instilling a culture of distributed leadership so the entire teaching staff is involved in improving their own practice and contributing to the betterment of the district overall. Preschool teacher Nicole explained how this situation appears to her:

I feel like our administration realizes we're small...and I think one of them said, "We're a

small school thinking big.” And they do give us opportunities to go visit other schools and other teachers in our grades so that we can see what they’re doing and kind of reflect on how we want to take that into our classrooms.

Teachers pointed to feeling valued by their administration and having collaborative relationships as central reasons to remain at Riverbend. Despite the difficulties of wearing “lots of different hats,” teachers recognized the professional development opportunities and related salary increases as incentive to dedicate themselves to the academic and social missions of the district.

In both Galena Ridge and Riverbend collaboration was encouraged through administrative design, while in Timber Lake opportunities to collaborate were teacher initiated. However, in each district, school administrators thoughtfully shaped structured supports for their staff, articulating plans for school cultures predicated on developing leadership skills. Teachers expressed appreciation for the accessibility of professional growth opportunities and how they complemented responsibilities in their classrooms.

### **Connections to Community**

Across all three districts, teachers also pointed to their dual role as respected community members as personally significant and a reason to remain teaching in their districts. The “dual role” label pertains to the individual school districts as places to educate local youth as well as to serve the cultural and social functions of the broader community. For example, teachers and administrators described the Galena Ridge school district as the hub of the community. They took seriously the responsibility to educate the community’s children and felt the broader community supported them in these efforts. Mia teaches fourth grade and described what it is like to be an educator in Galena Ridge:

I feel very valued as a professional in this community. As a teacher in this community. I feel very respected by the community members... The students are wonderful. I think they come to school every day wanting to give their best and learn and work hard. I feel, for the most part, families are very supportive. I really enjoy teaching in our district.

Teachers in Galena Ridge also discussed the importance of relationships with students and families, and they identified their professional role as advancing the academic success of students while expanding their knowledge beyond that of the local community. However, Leah, an elementary literacy interventionist, stated:

I think [families] would say that we’re important and they want to support us, and they know that we have a big job to do and an important role in educating their students and teaching them to love and respect their community...I think they want to make sure that we’re including them and that the kids are learning in the community, and about their community, and are part of their community... They take pride in this place and they want their children and their future to continue that.

Unlike in Galena Ridge, teachers in Riverbend and Timber Lake characterized their work beyond academic instruction as addressing community challenges related to poverty. The teachers in Timber Lake pointed to the role of the school as an equalizing factor in the community—where the “haves” and the “have-nots” join together in classrooms and at extracurricular events. While there is tension in the district over finances, the teachers perceived strong community support of the social and cultural functions of the Timber Lake school district. For example, senior citizens often join students for lunch or walk the halls in the early morning for exercise, and the entire graduating class of 2019 (10 seniors at the time of the study) all received college scholarships from local and regional organizations. Lou Ann, a music teacher, described how central the district is in the community:

Last night we had our spring concert, and as I looked in the audience, there were so many senior citizens out there. And it just made me aware of how this school is the center of our community [like] those mornings where I see senior citizens sitting at each one of the lunch tables out here with a student, and they’re reading to them. And on Fridays, they come here to eat lunch with us. So the school, I think, is probably the centerpiece of our town here.

The teachers in Riverbend also recognized the significant role the school district has in the community and, by extension, the importance of their own professional roles in supporting the development of local youth. While the distinction between social worker and teacher can appear ambiguous, teachers in Riverbend are committed to offering high-quality educational experiences for their students. Stacy, a special education teacher, commented on the community’s ethos and how the school district is part of that ethos:

The first thing that comes to my mind in this community, is that they take care of their own...I mean if we have a tragedy in town and there’s

people connected to it, everybody rallies around that family. During the flood, everybody helps everybody. And that's the really neat thing about here, is [the school district] is very much about helping families. And about making sure that everybody is taken care of... your basic needs are taken care of; your educational needs are taken care of.

In all three districts, teachers often conflated their own dual role as teachers and community members with the multiple roles their schools had in their rural communities. For these teachers who stayed in their rural schools, these larger responsibilities were viewed as personally and professionally significant.

### **Personal and Professional Ties**

While teachers referenced personal and familial factors in relation to their decision to stay, these factors were often shared through connection with the broader community environment. Reasons such as providing a quality education for their own children or engaging in outdoor recreational activities were deeply entwined with their professional and community relationships. For example, Aaron, a first-grade teacher, differentiated between his professional teacher identity in Timber Lake and as a fellow community member who enjoys hunting:

I think that as a person who has come up here [to teach] I'm recognized as the first-grade teacher and basketball coach, but I'm also known to community members as a person who bear hunts. I have a little guide service, so I'm known as an individual rather than just my title in the school, and I think that's appreciated. I appreciate it. So I can have conversations other than just school-related conversations with community members...I think that's a beneficial way to get to know other people, and then they get to know me.

This recognition in the broader community as well as the ability to form meaningful connections with community members was a common theme across the three districts. Fiona, a middle school special education teacher and local resident in Galena Ridge, reflected positively on her visibility in the community, particularly in relation to being a role model for students:

I feel like I'm really honored to work in this school because they really appreciate education so much in this small community. You know, I can't go to the gas station without seeing one of my students,

or go out to eat without running into about three of them. And it's really cool, because no matter what, they don't really see you as a person, they see you as a role model.

Teachers in Galena Ridge described the significance of feeling personally valued by community members, while teachers in Riverbend praised the education their own children received, expressing appreciation for the small-school atmosphere and connections developed over time. Rose, a math intervention specialist in Riverbend, indicated the importance of being a teacher who is embedded within the community and recalled how important this experience was for her own children:

When [my children] started preschool and kindergarten, they were exposed to seniors...they could see where they were going. They could see, its graduation day, we're going to go watch them practice. So, it was very beneficial, from a parent standpoint.

Riverbend teachers understood the value in investing educational and social resources in the community because they also saw benefit in securing this type of school environment for their own children.

In sum, rural teachers in Riverbend, Timber Lake, and Galena Ridge pointed to personal and professional relationships as significant in deciding to remain teaching in their rural schools. While not free from challenges, the emphasis on establishing relationships with community members, colleagues, and students provided a "counterbalance" (Gallo, 2020) to any hardships.

### **Discussion**

Our study's findings reveal the centrality of relationships to teachers' decisions to stay in their rural schools. These relationships span school and community spheres, blurring the lines between them and illuminating a more nuanced experience of teaching in rural schools. In this section, we revisit the spheres of influence conceptual framing to further examine which specific personal, classroom, school, and community factors influenced teachers' reasons to stay, and to what end their professional experiences can yield insight into the challenges and needs of rural teacher retention.

#### **Personal Factors**

Across the three rural districts teachers referenced personal characteristics that enhanced their commitment to working in a rural school environment. These characteristics include professional knowledge, or subject-matter expertise;

the ability or desire to be a team player; and an appreciation of the rural landscape. While personal factors influenced teachers' retention decisions, reasons such as providing a quality education for their own children or engaging in outdoor recreational activities are deeply entwined with their professional and community relationships. In Timber Lake, partaking in the joys of the natural environment was a common factor in teachers' decisions to stay. Teachers in Galena Ridge expressed the significance of feeling personally valued by community members, while teachers in Riverbend praised the education their own children received, expressing appreciation for the small-school atmosphere and long-term relationships. Echoing Rooks's (2018) conclusion that relationships with longtime residents support rural teacher retention, teachers in all three districts pointed to their dual role as respected community members as personally significant.

### **Classroom Factors**

Teachers' decisions to stay in their rural schools often related to their commitment to their students. Classroom autonomy was considered a positive attribute by teachers because they were allowed to make decisions in their classrooms that supported their students' academic, social, and emotional needs. The close relationships teachers often had with students, as well as connections with the community and consistent communication with other school staff, also supported their instructional practices. Surprisingly, teachers' reasons to stay related to classroom instruction are all described in the empirical literature as reasons why teachers *leave* rural teaching positions. For example, the need for subject-matter expertise and flexibility in teaching numerous and varied courses, or across grade-levels, is linked to teacher dissatisfaction (Zost, 2010). Similarly, "wearing many hats" is often referenced as a source of strain in teaching in small rural schools (Biddle & Azano, 2016). While this strain was noted by the teachers in our study, the significance of pitching in to provide students with academic and extracurricular experiences often outweighed the professional stress. Similar to Gallo (2020), the teachers' acknowledgment of rural teaching challenges was balanced by the recognition of the local value and impact of their work.

### **School Factors**

Professional relationships and leadership opportunities emerged across our findings as quite central to teachers' retention decisions. Professional relationships between teachers and their peers as well as between teachers and administrators formed the crux of the most significant school characteristics in each of the three rural districts.

While teachers exerted the most control over their work environment within their individual classrooms, respectful and trusting relationships with administrators allowed for teachers' sense of autonomy to be a positive workplace attribute instead of surfacing as professional isolation. Numerous studies have found that social and professional isolation (e.g., Hammer, 2005; Miller, 2012; Monk, 2007) and lack of administrator support (Podolsky et al., 2019; Reagan et al., 2019) can indicate teacher dissatisfaction and lead to attrition. Importantly, administrator support for teachers must be authentic and noticed by teaching staff to be effective. In Riverbend and Galena Ridge, administrators clearly articulated their intention to develop teacher capacity for leadership and innovation, and their teachers understood these expectations and appreciated the focus on professional development. In a different manner, the administrator in Timber Lake was consistent in his message of teamwork and Timber Lake teachers responded with a shared commitment to the school community. Overall, a collaborative culture, exemplified by professional opportunities to connect with other teachers to align curriculum or address student needs, appeared to be key to teacher satisfaction and retention.

### **Community Factors**

Rural schools are often the social and cultural center of their communities (Tieken, 2014), and in our study, teachers remarked upon being a part of something meaningful as a significant reason to remain committed to teaching in their rural schools. While the specific characteristics of each school-community relationship differed—from providing student and family social and economic support in the wake of environmental disaster in Riverbend, to upholding community expectations of academic prestige and local cultural relevance in Galena Ridge, to being an open community space for all residents in Timber Lake—the school district's impact on the local community emerged repeatedly as a source of pride for teachers. Being visible as part of the broader community, beyond their role as teachers—as parents or business owners or neighbors—was also a common theme for these teachers who decided to stay.

While teachers pointed to personal and professional factors that influenced their decision to stay in their rural schools, it is important to note that our findings are not devoid of challenges. Teachers' perceptions of community support for local schools are often shaped by local economic or societal challenges. For example, community economic precarity (Seelig, 2017a) or economic inequality is not a school-based challenge, yet it can affect the ability of low-income families to pass referenda and raise their taxes. Economic conditions also shape the presence and affordability of local housing options for professional

families, access to medical and social services for residents and students alike, and opportunities for spousal employment and cultural experiences for children. The natural environment in rural communities can be a source of local economic development, an attraction for new families and businesses, or a disaster threat for local residents. In sum, community characteristics are not isolated factors but permeate the resources, actions, and relationships within every sphere of influence (Ulferts, 2016) that teachers referenced as significant in their retention decisions.

### Implications for Research and Practice

By mapping rural teachers' experiences and perspectives of their schools and communities within a spheres of influence framework, our study suggests the need for a conceptual reframing, or new way of thinking, in the research on teacher retention. Practical implications for addressing rural teacher retention are also surfaced, suggesting a new way of "doing" that situates school-community relationships at the center.

### A New Way of Thinking

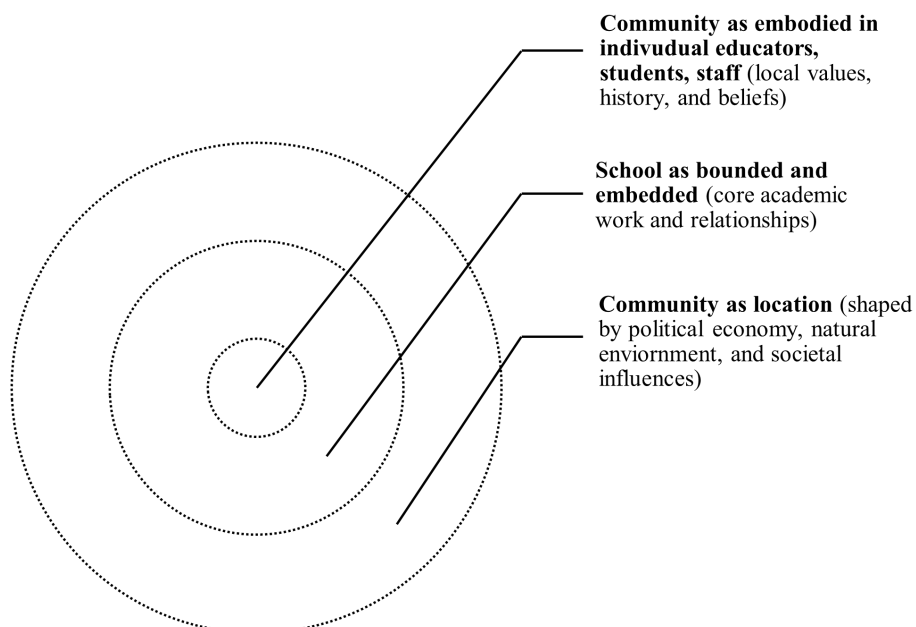
While many rural teacher workforce studies suggest prioritizing the rural context in the recruitment of teachers and in teacher preparation programs, shifting the focus of teacher retention research from why teachers *leave* to why

they *stay* illuminates how rural community characteristics also keep teachers in their rural schools. Our findings point to relationships—between students and teachers, colleagues and administrators, and teachers with community members—as central to rural teacher retention. In this way, separating the concepts of school and community in rural teacher pipeline research appears to be a common error that may impede the design and enactment of creative solutions to rural teacher turnover. Furthermore, while the spheres of influence framework surfaces discrete retention challenges in each of the four categories, we suggest that the boundaries between the spheres may offer useful sites for research and practice.

To better orient teacher retention policies and practices to the realities of teaching in a rural community, we offer a "colocated model" of the embedded relationships of rural schools and communities (see Figure 1). We posit that "community" is *embodied* by teachers, students, and administrators through their personal values, histories, and beliefs—essentially bringing the community within the school walls and infusing all that occurs with a sense of community. Simultaneously, the school itself is *situated* geographically and historically within a particular rural community, which is reflected within the political, economic, and cultural relationships with community members, business owners, and local politicians (i.e., taxpayers). *In the middle* of these two points of community lie the school and the core academic work of education. With this colocated

**Figure 1**

*Colocated Model of Rural School and Community*



*Note.* This model reflects the complex relationship and blurred boundaries between rural school and community.

model, we suggest that surfacing the blurred boundaries of school and community promotes the strengths of rural areas instead of the often messy and deficit-based complications. Given this entwined relationship, the challenges of the rural teacher labor market require new approaches beyond economic assessments of teacher supply and demand. *Note.* This model reflects the complex relationship and blurred boundaries between rural school and community.

### A New Way of Doing

In considering rural teacher retention from the perspective of rural teachers, we suggest additional directions for supporting a committed and high-quality rural teacher workforce. First, rural school and district administrators can offer a variety of opportunities for new and returning teachers to interact intentionally and authentically with community members beyond parent-teacher conferences and school fairs. This investment in bringing teachers into meaningful dialogue with community members can be both cost efficient and support forming social ties between the school and community. Second, attending to within-school opportunities for teacher collaboration is of utmost importance in cultivating a school culture that is both professional and cohesive. Setting aside meaningful time for professional networking as well as providing avenues to hear teachers' insights and feedback on district policies and practices signals recognition of teacher knowledge and expertise. Finally, policymakers who are concerned with educational quality and economic development in rural communities should consider ways to strengthen the connections between school and communities, including but not limited to ensuring equitable school funding that does not rely on local wealth and property value.

In conclusion, the disparate elements of individual teachers, independent school characteristics, and aspects of any given rural community are more useful theoretically and empirically when understood as a collective. While we are certainly not the first to articulate the significance of rural school-community relationships to the operation of rural schooling (e.g., Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Seelig, 2017b; Tieken, 2014; Zuckerman, 2019), our study suggests that a redesigned approach to rural teacher retention should also be premised on these entwined connections.

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