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Teaching On The Prairie: Narrative Lived Experiences Of Self, Belonging, And Place From Two Beginning Teachers In Rural North Dakota Schools

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TEACHING ON THE PRAIRIE:
NARRATIVE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SELF, BELONGING, AND PLACE FROM TWO
BEGINNING TEACHERS IN RURAL NORTH DAKOTA SCHOOLS
by

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This document, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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This document is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.

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7/26/2021

Date

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PERMISSION

Title   Teaching on the Prairie: Narrative Lived Experiences of Self, Belonging, and Place from Two Beginning Teachers in Rural North Dakota Schools

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LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

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ABSTRACT

Retaining rural Midwestern teachers is problematic for many K-12 school districts. Through interviews with two first year teachers in rural North Dakota schools, this study considered what experiences contributed to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school. It was thought that teacher education preparation pertaining to rural schools specifically would increase the likelihood of retention for these beginning teachers.

Rural communities and schools in North Dakota are plentiful and provide the stepping-stone into the teaching profession for many beginning teachers. The choice to stay in the rural school or move into a larger school community has a significant impact. Rural school boards need tools to provide successful beginning experiences for these teachers. Additionally, teacher preparation courses can explore the development of rural field experiences that may also increase the likelihood of success for the beginning teachers.

This narrative study yielded three major themes from the data collection: sense of place, sense of self, and sense of belonging. As these beginning teachers experienced various levels of expectations, influences, and relationships over the course of their first year in rural schools, they grew in their sense of self, place, and belonging. As they shared their stories, it was found that they did not have specific teacher preparation for rural schools; however, this study found that relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators were strong factors for retention. Remembering that it takes a village to raise a teacher, and if the village wants to retain teachers, it may need to change the lens through which they are prepared.

Keywords: rural teacher education, rural teacher retention, mentoring, building relationships, place in education, narrative study

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As I push my cart down the grocery store aisle, one of my students comes up to me, peeks into my cart, and makes conversation about our day in school. Later that evening, a group of girls from my class come and sit with me at the high school basketball game in the school gym and we talk about the star player, a brother to one of the girls sitting with me. The next day during our morning meeting we talk about the basketball game, seeing each other in the grocery store, and ask each other if we are going to the football game at the end of the week. All the familiarity of a family under the structure of a classroom is played out in my small rural school classroom.

The old adage "it takes a village to raise a child" impresses upon the reader a picture of a nurturing community that holds its children in high esteem while providing opportunities for growth. This adage seems to ring true in this small, rural community by way of the ease of conversation and meeting in familiar places. Community is lived in the everyday moments with my students and myself. I am a member of this village and a caretaker of the children. As a teacher in this village, I want to be valued, held in high regard, and supported in my work. I want to stay; I like it here. What do I need to make sure this is the place I want to be?

Seeking that first teaching position in any community is exciting, scary, and full of expectation. Finding a position in a small rural community presents with the same feeling, but there is an extra layer of expectations. Will this small community, where lives are intertwined at school and church, where most people know each other, accept the beginning teacher? Will the teacher's loyalties to the rural community be questioned? Wonder at the possibility of the school

family, community, and potential workmates may weigh on a beginning teacher's mind. Will the village the beginning teacher joins be as welcoming and reinforcing as the one that was left?

Choosing to sign a teaching contract is weighted in decisions as to where and why. Where does one begin to look for teaching openings and why does one consider particular communities? Many factors must be considered including how much and what kind of support is available for the beginning teacher, what are the values and norms of the community, and how well was the beginning teacher prepared for the particular setting. Weighing the benefits and consequences of that decision impact rural teachers, the schools, and the communities where they teach. Retaining teachers in rural schools is often difficult and school boards in rural districts are often faced with the challenge of meeting staffing needs that result from higher turnover and a difficult recruiting environment. Understanding why teachers choose to stay can benefit not only the students, but also the community (Burton & Johnson, 2010).

While I am a member of this rural village that is raising capable students, I came from a village of supportive professors who encouraged and supported my growth as a teacher. I know the relationships I formed during my teacher preparation paved the way for me to be a successful teacher in a rural community. As I enter into the next stage of my career as a teacher educator, I want to provide that same level of encouragement and support for my preservice teachers. Regardless of my students' backgrounds, I want them to experience the sense community when they begin their first teaching assignment. I want them to have their own stories of how they helped raise their village's children.

Need for the Study

Rural schools face a unique set of challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers; the population of both the school and community, resources, and support systems all become important factors in choosing to teach in a rural school. According to Hardre and Sullivan (2008), "though 30% of US students attend rural schools, as few as 6% of studies done on teaching and learning are done in rural schools and classrooms" (p. 259). Knowing there is a gap in research presents the opportunity to study effective rural teacher education programs and begin to close the gap on research of urban and rural schools.

Beginning rural teachers may have ties to the community, impacting their decisions to stay, or to use their first position as a stepping-stone while gathering experience. Either choice impacts rural schools when school boards consider how to effectively retain those teachers. Exploring professional relationships of beginning teachers within their schools and communities may yield strategies that administration can adopt to support retention.

Through readings about teacher mentoring, teacher retention, teacher preparation, and rural teachers' needs, there is a call to effectively train teachers for rural teaching and retain them in these roles. Much of the research about first-year teacher mentoring has proven effective, supporting the idea that mentoring teachers in rural schools would also be effective (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). Burton and Johnson (2010) and Mitchell et al. (2019) all state there is a need for further research of rural field experience placements for preservice teachers. They all share the importance of providing real-world experiences in rural communities, field trips so to speak, to allow for exposure to rural communities and student populations (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study is seeking to understand the "average everydayness" (Guignon, 2012, p.101) of a beginning rural teacher's career and sense of preparedness for the position. Wanting to know what makes the beginning rural teacher a successful educator is another question to be answered. Other questions include:

- Did the content covered in their teacher education courses contribute to their sense of success in their classrooms?

- Did a rural field experience contribute more to level of comfort in their rural classroom?

- Did their own background and desire to return to their home communities outweigh any educational factors?

- What was the primary factor in choosing a rural school as their first placement to launch their teaching career?

Answers to these questions in the form of stories told during interviews would be used to describe the lived experiences of the teachers, thus making this narrative inquiry study.

Research indicates teachers leave the profession at a higher rate in the first five years of their career (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll et al., 2004; Podolsky et al., 2017). Implementing a quality teacher mentoring program has proven to be an effective strategy to increase retention, however much of the research has focused on retention of teachers in high poverty urban school districts (Gholam, 2018; Guarino et al., 2006; Whipp et al., 2017). First-year teachers in rural school districts tend not to stay. Collecting interview data from first-year rural teachers about the factors that influence their decisions stay in their current settings may influence administrators and teacher education practices.

Research Questions

This study is guided by this overarching question: What experiences contribute to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district? Additionally, this study seeks answers to these questions:

1. How do beginning rural teachers experience living and teaching in rural communities?
2. How do beginning rural teachers experience belonging in their school?
3. What are the stories the beginning teachers share about their teacher education preparation programs?

Conceptual Framework

Community, school, and classroom are examples of places where identity is formed. Place, according to Qazimi (2014), is the way people experience, express, and imagine their settings. Having a sense of place may be based on memories or physical space and creates the lens through which other places are experienced. Gruenewald (2012) argues, "Places make us and because of this the culture of the place becomes part of our identity (p. 621). Nespor (1997) argues that teachers' everyday geography affects interactions with students and parents, thus linking place to belonging. Place becomes a pedagogical construct that needs to be forefront in teacher education (Reagan et al., 2019). Place shapes our life experiences including education while it is closely "linked to power, pedagogy, and the social context of schooling" (Butler et al., 2020, p. 65).

Oppression, Place, and Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality," also referred to as *conscientizacia* (Freire, 1970/1995, as cited in Greuenwald, 2008, p. 311). Freire's work in

Brazil focused on demarginalizing the impoverished peasants and developing educational

practices that would benefit them in their context (Brueing, 2011).

Critical pedagogy can be used to call attention to social norms that carry on social

injustices (Brueing, 2011). Rural schools may lack funds, monetary and human capital; however,

social justice could speak to the idea that just because the place is lacking, the students and

faculty are equally deserving of a quality, modern education. Students and teachers in rural

schools have just as much use for the content and curriculum as do their urban counterparts.

Empowerment as critical pedagogy speaks to providing equal opportunities to rural

students and teachers as well as urban students and teachers (Brueing, 2011). Power should not

be tied to place, yet it is; the ability to be valued for who you are and where you live matters for

rural and urban students and teachers.

While critical pedagogy does work to expose social contradictions and uses education to

enact social change, on a more local level that might mean ensuring equality in curriculums used

in the urban and rural districts or it might look like current professional development for rural

school districts. It may even mean a shift in the "Class A" versus "Class B" mentality in North

Dakota schools and extracurriculars, where "Class A" are the large urban school districts and the

"Class B" are the small rural school districts and, much like race and gender inequalities,

communities feel the difference or stigma of not being equal.

Critical Pedagogy and Place Combined

Critical pedagogy and place-based learning, while theoretically opposites, become a

conceptual framework in the study of how place can shape teachers (Gruenewald, 2008). By

combining the two, Gruenewald (2008) suggests this framework assists in understanding the

"place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education" (p. 320). Azano (2011) and

Gruenewald (2008) share that Freire and Macedo's (1987) ability to read the world, or places and contexts one knows, must come before reading the word, or texts or written works, to effect change in one's place identity. In doing this, the "notion of *conscientizacao*, becoming more fully human through transforming the oppressive elements of reality" comes to realization in critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 311). Knowing the world, or community in which one lives, allows student or teacher to make connections between their lived experiences and the learning that takes place in the classroom. Having the notion of *conscientizacao* enables students and teachers in rural settings to challenge the prejudices that may exist in both their community and the urban communities they frequent. That notion may also be the driving force for students and teachers to positively change their communities' mindsets and opportunities that are provided there.

According to Gruenewald (2008), while placed-based learning lacks a theoretical framework, it has underpinnings in experiential learning, problem-based learning, contextual learning, and constructivism, to name a few. Understanding the context of place and how place nurtures "placed learning" becomes important in teacher education, allowing preservice teachers to internalize the context of rurality (Azano, 2011; Gruenewald, 2008; Reagan et al., 2019). Providing opportunities for reflecting on one's place and relationship in it may allow for better insight how the place affects the rural culture (Gruenewald, 2008). Corbett (2016) argues that "if a child remains in the community, s/he is considered a failure because schooling is a journey that does not end in the locale," thus reinforcing the concept that rural places are marginalized and less likely to produce productive citizens (p. 274). Providing instruction and experiences to preservice teachers may mitigate this negative stereotype.

Eppley (2015) shares that schools are placed, therefore are defined by "unique social and cultural activities and relationships" (p. 70). Bushnell (1999) argues that inhabitants of rural communities must be residents rather than inhabitants. Residents know and live the culture, whereas inhabitants are merely passing through (Bushnell, 1999). While teachers can be residents or good inhabitants of their school community, when a sense of connection and investment is made into that culture, teaching and learning can become *placed* (Bushnell, 1999; Eppley, 2015). This study seeks to interpret the role of understanding place as a motivating factor in beginning rural teacher retention and how it can be supported in teacher preparation programs.

According to McLaren et al. (1990), culture can be situated in place, rural or urban. Leadership and authority from the urban culture can be used to marginalize the rural culture in education as national or core curriculum does not meet the needs of all students. The intersection of critical pedagogy and rural education comes by way of looking at how power and privilege are distributed and challenged (McLaren et al., 1990). Corbett (2016) supports the argument that leadership and authority in rural schools must look to support community-backed nonstandard curriculum. Rural education needs should not be tied to one particular community's needs but must connect to the global community that it inhabits (Corbett, 2016; Gruenewald, 2008). Breunig (2005) clarifies critical pedagogy as a way to "negotiate and transform the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relation of the larger community and society" (p. 109). Critical pedagogy can be used to integrate the lived culture with the community-backed curriculum through the leadership and authority of the rural school district.

Critical pedagogy and placed-based learning form the conceptual framework for this study by challenging me as the researcher to understand how power, position, and place can have an effect on teaching and learning. Those rural students and teachers should not be denied curriculum, resources, or exposure to content based on where they are geographically and how that education may be used differently in that place. Wanting to hear the stories from the beginning rural teachers provides insight to prove or disprove if there are truly inequalities or injustices in our rural schools. Culture can be lived, therefore rural culture can be lived and made to not be less than urban culture; educational power in both cultures should not be dependent on place (McLaren et al., 1990). This study has significance for teacher education professors as I look for insight from two beginning teachers experiences and uncover how prepared they felt to teach in their rural places. Knowing how they experienced the rural culture is important to me as the researcher so I can inform my future practice and the practice of my colleagues.

Rationale for the Study

This study is situated in claims pertaining to a lack of research in rural education. This study is being conducted using those gaps as a staring place to possibly effect change at a state and local level. Research identifying best practices in preparing and retaining teachers for rural school districts is lacking (Barter, 2008; Burton et al., 2010; Knoblauch et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2019; Moffa et al., 2018). At the state level, creating or modifying programs for preservice teachers to be successful in rural schools is the desired outcome of this study as rural schools often experience high turnover (Hardre et al., 2008). Locally, understanding that rural communities and school districts have differences that influence teaching and learning can provide the impetus for changing the design of teacher preparation programs and mentoring support in rural schools (Hadre et al., 2008; Monk, 2007).

Teacher education programs at the postsecondary level contribute to retention by providing preservice teachers with clarification of the expectations of teaching in rural schools. Knowing the gaps in teacher preparation programs may lead to creation of more rural field experiences, more focus in the teacher preparation courses on teaching in a variety of communities, specifically rural ones, and retention of beginning rural teachers. Understanding why teachers choose to stay can benefit not only the students, but also the community (Burton & Johnson, 2010). Ideally, this study would shed light on the components that are missing from teacher preparation programs so that those items could be created or incorporated into them, assisting with beginning rural teacher retention.

Methodological Overview

Using a narrative inquiry approach to gather the beginning teachers' stories of their experiences in a rural place, this study will look for common themes of those experiences. Lived and retold stories are used to make meaning of one's life and understand how others and the community help complete that story (Clandinin, 2006). Analyzing the participants' interview answers becomes a mode of understanding how their school lives are co-constructed with their rural communities (Conroy, 2003). Knowledge of the local community comes from understanding how the locals internalize all the local details (Geertz, 2003), thus as the researcher, I aim to understand how beginning rural teachers makes sense of the local details to feel connected or disconnected to their school communities. As a researcher, I am able to use the contexts of the teacher preparation program and rural school district to make meaning of how beginning rural teachers attend to those local details (Eppley, 2015). Finally, I can begin to identify common themes that may provide insight to why those teachers chose to stay and how retention may be positively affected.

In the spring of 2021, I sent an initial survey to qualifying rural school districts in North Dakota to determine potential participants. Using the results, initial interviews were scheduled for early May. After the first round of data was analyzed, it was shared with participants to ensure trustworthiness. Participants signed their contracts for the 2021-2022 school before the interviews were held. Finally, the data would be analyzed and complied into a final report to be shared.

Definition of Terms

Rural: defined by the US Census Bureau (2016) area that is not urban and has fewer than 2,500 people. According to the US Census Bureau (2016), there is no formal definition of rural.

Preservice teacher: one who is in methods courses and expected to participate in field experience hours teaching and observing veteran teachers

Beginning teacher: a teacher with one to three years of teaching experience past graduation from a teacher education program

Teacher education program: a program of study in an accredited college or university that focuses on teacher education classes, field experiences, and student teaching

School district: all the schools situated in a particular physical area governed by a superintendent

Rural school district: a majority of students live in rural areas, with a district of fewer than 600 students in a town of fewer than 2,500 people (Rural School and Community Trust, 2013)

Rural community: community that is not urban and has fewer than 2,500 people (US Census, 2016)

Retention: when teachers sign a contract for the following year and return to the same school

      district to teach

Mentor program: program to provide observation, conferencing, and support to beginning

      teachers in any participating school district (NDESPB, 2017)

Mentor: colleagues, guides, role models who participate in professional development and are

      assigned to one beginning teacher to observe, listen to, and coach (NDESPB, 2017)

Veteran teacher: teacher in a school that has been there at least five years

Administrator: a principal or superintendent of a school or school district

Rural school: school with a total population of fewer than 1,000 students

Rural teaching: teaching in a rural school with fewer than 1,000 students in a rural district or

      remote town school district (ND DPI, 2018)

Field experience: time spent in elementary or high school classrooms by preservice teachers to

      observe and teach lessons written in teacher education preparation classes

Summary

      This chapter introduced the how critical pedagogy and place became the lens used to investigate beginning rural teachers' experiences in their first year in the classroom, how mentoring programs affected them, and how their teacher preparation supported them. Wanting to know how to support beginning rural teachers was the driving force behind this study. Digging deeper into the motivation and mindset of beginning rural teachers though listening to their stories provided insight as to how best to provide teacher preparation. Also, examining the themes that emerge from the interviews sheds light into what beginning rural teachers need in

terms of support from their school administrators and communities. Chapter II will review the literature of place, teacher preparation, beginning rural teachers, recruiting and retaining rural teachers, mentoring, and how they intersect. Chapter III will outline and discuss the methodological process. Chapter IV will discuss the findings and Chapter V will share the conclusions and recommendations of this study

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Providing appropriate rural teacher preparation and discovering strategies to increase retention are important issues facing rural school districts today (Barter, 2008; Burton & Johnson, 2010; Knoblauch & Chase, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2019; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Review of the literature focuses on the historical lens of rural teacher preparation, how place affects preparation and retention, becoming a rural teacher, and how to recruit and retain rural teachers. There is a common adage that states it takes a village to raise a child; this literature review is finding it takes a village to raise and *keep* a teacher.

Historically, rural schools have been the training ground for urban schools (Burnham, 1908). Normal schools trained teachers for the urban, graded schools while graduates of the urban high schools became the teaching force for the rural schools (Burnham, 1908). Country school-teachers' associations recognized a need to train their own for the rural schools to ensure a more equitable education between the rural and urban schools (Burnham, 1908). In response to this need, universities and normal schools instituted a program of differentiated instruction for rural school-teachers (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Addressing the issue, Robinson (1954) writes:

It is important both to rural teachers and to the profession as a whole, that so significantly large a group be in the mainstream of the profession, on a par with and as free to move

about within the profession as any other teacher, with their abilities and choice of rural teaching known and accepted like that of any other specialization. (p. 30)

Early on, differentiating course work for teachers was noted in 1908 as necessary because teachers could be assigned to "a few large classes all within one or two grades and a school having many small classes scattered through six or eight grades" (Burnham, 1908, p. 141). In 1954, Robinson shared a similar study stating that "every major nation-wide study of teacher education has recommended some preparation specifically for rural schools" (p. 30). Biddle and Azano (2016) also found the need for differentiation in teacher preparation during the 1900s to 1945 as an approach to recruit and retain rural teachers.

In addition to providing differentiation in teacher preparation related to setting, rural or urban, teacher education programs needed to include training on the rural life. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a need to train teachers to address the specific rural content and rural life skills (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Robinson, 1954; Burnham, 1908). Understanding how the rural culture and unique skill set influence "the right attitude toward education" in rural settings is "a vital factor in national progress and in the characters of a multitude of individuals" (Burnham, 1908, p. 143). One hundred years ago, the need to observe in rural and urban schools as a preservice teacher was recognized as an important component in training rural teachers (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Robinson, 1954; Burnham, 1908). Changes in teacher education focusing on teaching in one room school-houses rather than just same grade classrooms became important to the success of the rural student, ensuring that rural students were well prepared for life after school (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural teacher education was changing for the better.

Place

Place matters. Preservice teachers are trained to work with students in suburban and urban areas, regardless of where they are educated or where they will teach (Siwatu, 2011). Growing up and attending school in suburban or urban areas provides a specific lens for students to experience social positions and perspectives, as does experiencing a rural environment. When preservice teachers come together to learn how to teach children, those perspectives are challenged (Han et al., 2015). Teacher education programs have a responsibility to prepare preservice teachers for a variety of places, providing multiple settings for field experiences and honoring the uniqueness of the rural and urban settings.

Finding teachers for urban and rural schools is difficult. Gilbert (1995) shares that "many new and practicing teachers do not choose to work in urban schools" (p. 291). Peterson et al. (2018) share that there is a strong bond between rural teachers and their communities, however, many new teachers do not choose that location as a starting point in their careers. Salary discrepancies between rural, suburban, and urban districts can play a role in recruitment and retainment. Additionally, scarcity of resources and professional support may dissuade new teachers from signing a contract in a rural school (Peterson et al., 2018).

While there are many negatives to teaching in rural schools, Peterson et al. (2018) identify several benefits. Rural schools foster a sense of family and community, where many rural teachers participate in community events. Parents and teachers "do not exist in separate worlds but are united with others in the community into a milieu of common purpose and direction" (Chance, 2002, as cited in Peterson et al. 2018). Identity and a sense of connectedness to place when teaching in rural schools may lead to a shared sense of responsibility for the students' learning between the teachers and parents (Eppley, 2015; Peterson et al., 2018). This

sense of responsibility can alleviate new teachers' doubts or insecurities when deciding to choose a rural school; knowing there is a built-in support system in the community and school may be beneficial.

The number of rural students varies by state. Figure 1 illustrates the difference in the percent of rural students in the United States compared to the percent of students in North Dakota. Using this information, the importance of providing preservice teachers opportunities to teach in rural schools is reinforced. Figure 2 shows that 49 percent of schools in North Dakota have populations of less than 600 students, stressing the importance of providing rural field experiences for preservice teachers. The data from Table 1 shows that compared to other midwestern states, North Dakota has a high percentage of rural schools, again reinforcing the importance of providing rural field experiences. Using the various sources reiterates that rural populations outnumber urban in the state. Teacher educators and school administrators must recognize the importance of providing appropriate opportunities for preservice and beginning teachers to increase their chances of feeling successful in the classroom.

Figure 1. Data from a Report of the Rural School and Trust, November 2019
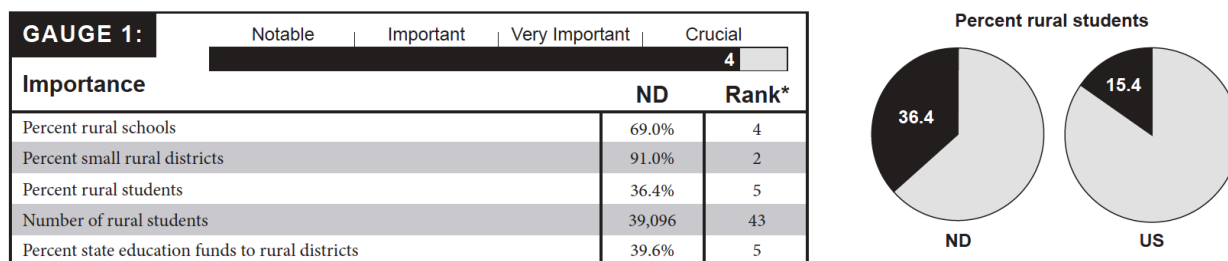
*A rank of 1 is most crucial or urgent according to the Rural School and Trust Report, 2019

Table 1. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Selected statistics from the public elementary and secondary education universe: school year 2015-16.

Table 4 – distribution of students in membership, by state or jurisdiction: School year 2015-16			City		Suburban		Town		Rural	
State or jurisdiction	Total number of operating schools[1]	Total number of students[2]	Number of schools	Percent of students	Number of schools	Percent of students	Number of schools	Percent of students	Number of schools	Percent of students
United States[3]	88,835	49,312,454	23,756	30.2	28,291	39.7	11,582	11.3	25,188	18.7
Iowa	1,323	497,345	233	27.4	109	12.8	321	25.5	660	34.2
Kansas	1,311	488,382	249	28.3	148	17.4	321	26.3	593	28.1
Minnesota	1,666	832,485	329	21.4	426	36.2	325	20.6	586	21.7
Montana	817	145,240	64	25.2	11	2.0	138	36.7	604	36.1
North Dakota	471	106,372	61	27.7	24	11.6	64	21.5	322	39.2
South Dakota	650	132,433	56	26.8	6	1.7	99	30.2	489	41.3
Wyoming	358	94,717	52	25.0	6	2.0	114	44.1	186	28.9

Figure 2. Enrollment in North Dakota Schools 2019, Data from NDDPI Data
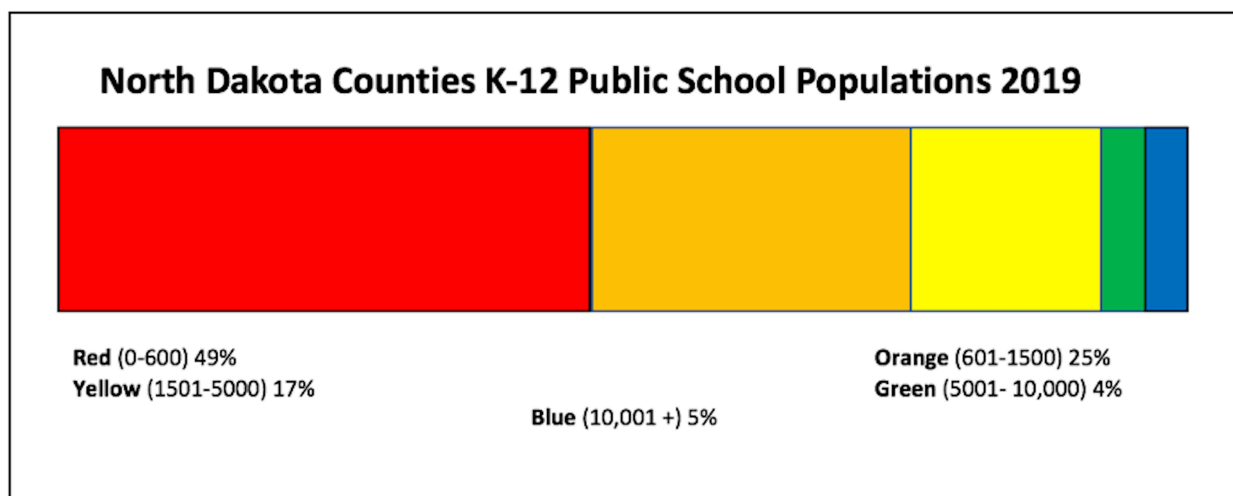
Teacher Preparation: Looking Through an Historical Lens

From the turn of the 20th century to post World War II, differentiation in teacher education programs addressed training teachers for rural schools. From the 1950s through the 1970s, there was less of a push to differentiate and train teachers for specific populations (Biddle

& Azano, 2016). With the passage of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the Elementary and Secondary Act of 2001, and the addition of college and career readiness skills in 2007, training teachers for rural schools found new life (Biddle & Azano, 2016). Rural education journals were founded in the 1980s and began to shed light on the challenges rural teachers and schools were facing (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

While limited research was occurring at the tail end of the 20th century, teacher education programs began to be seen as "metro-centric" (Peterson et al. 2018, p. 189) focusing less on the issues related to rural teaching and more on suburban schools. New partnerships between universities and schools were developed in an effort to bridge the gap of isolation in training. Place-based training became popular as a method to focus on the uniqueness of a variety of teaching situations: rural, urban, and consolidated schools (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

Place-Based Teacher Preparation

Ajayi (2014) shares that place-based teacher preparation "prepares student teachers to imagine ways by which rural lifestyles, values, culture, and education are constituted and realized" (p. 252). Approaching teacher preparation in this way allows preservice teachers to experience rural life and become immersed in the culture of the community. Creating opportunities for preservice teachers to experience diversity in course work helps build confidence in teaching a variety of students in a variety of cultures (Miretzky & Stevens, 2012). Using culturally responsive classroom practices can aid teachers in using their students' lived experiences to strengthen learning (Lester, 2012). Rural culture can be stereotyped as not as worldly or knowing; however, preservice teachers need to remember that the culture can be specific to the community and should be celebrated (Reese et al., 2014).

Critical pedagogy can be an approach to empower teachers to build a classroom of socially-just thinkers who look to understand how their geographic place intersects with their learning place (Gruenewald, 2008). Gruenewald (2008) offers that a critical pedagogy of place can become a lens to view "placeless curriculum and settle for abstractions and simulations of classroom learning" and be purposeful in teaching students and planning experiences to be empathic to their communities (p. 317).

Approaching teaching students in rural communities with a sense of "responding flexibly to diverse students' moment-by-moment" builds a sense of empathy and understanding in the teacher (Warren, 2018, p. 179). This response builds relationships between the students and teacher by allowing the rural culture to be honored. Also, professional relationships are formed that support the connections between the pedagogy learned in the teacher preparation program and the "context of students' lives" (Ajayi, 2014, p. 255). Contending with the contextual factors of cultural backgrounds, ability levels and motivational factors, and available resources is important for preservice teachers' success in the classroom (Gilbert, 1995).

According to Monk, (2007), rural districts with students who belong to agricultural families tend to view education differently through the perspective of resources and opportunities that are available to them geographically and economically. This study looked at the idea of rural economies being place based, such as agricultural or seasonal factory work and the effects this has on rural schools' ability to attract and keep quality teachers. While this study was very general in nature and looked at western and eastern rural schools across the nation, it is important to include in this literature review as reminder to look at all the facets that come together to create a rural school setting. The student population may be more migrant in nature, have more students identified with special needs, and may not view higher education as necessary or

important (Monk, 2007). Not to be taken as a negative connotation, Monk (2007) shares that rural populations have less geographic opportunities and a "narrowness of choice in regard to shopping, schools, and medical services" (p.156). Much like inner city urban locales, beginning teachers in rural settings may encounter a sense of hopelessness from their students in regard to the importance of education. Understanding the implications that some rural student populations face from the geographic isolation and scarcity of resources and how that may affect the mindset of their future students is important in teacher preparation.

Rural students' motivation may wax and wane much like students in an urban setting; however, Hardre and Hennessey (2013) found that motivation of rural students was dependent on the geographical location of the school. While rural students may be more physical isolated and have less community resources, the motivation strategies used the teachers in the study did not affect the students any differently than students in other geographic areas (Hardre & Hennessey, 2013). Finally, providing access to adequate resources, whether it be qualified mentors or time in rural field experience placements, is a contributing factor to success in rural schools (Lohfink et al., 2011; Thompson & Schademan, 2019).

Linking students' rural community knowledge to teaching can provide students with resources and strategies to improve their standard of living (Ajayi, 2014; Gruenewald, 2008). Teaching preservice teachers how to preserve the cultural story of the rural community becomes important for understanding their rural students (Ajayi, 2014; Corbett, 2010). Emphasizing that preservice teachers need to know their students' backgrounds becomes an important component of the teacher preparation (Moll et al., 2011). Using these strategies can link the rural home-school connection and possibly increase retention.

Employing place-based teaching strategies can strengthen the rural school community. Designing courses to address culturally responsive pedagogy that focuses on rurality is needed to enhance preservice teachers' repertoire of teaching strategies (Anazo & Stewart, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2019; Monk, 2007). Additionally, preservice teachers need to be placed in rural field experiences ensuring "that those (field experiences) must be carefully planned and structured around a framework that attends to the nuances of culture and place" (Anazo & Stewart, 2016, p.119). Providing preservice teachers with tools and strategies to feel comfortable in the rural school may be a contributing factor to retention.

Becoming a Rural Teacher

Baxter (2008) expressed that rural living is defined by "Low populations, reliance on single resource industries, a sense of kinship, place, and mind and a unique symbiotic relationship between schools and their communities, which make them different from urban centers" (p. 469). Keeping this definition in mind can benefit teacher education programs when creating courses that address the features of rural life. Approaching course development from a constructivist theory can shift the perspective from "more of a relationship between teacher and student, more than transmission of knowledge and the creation of knowledge for students" to believing that "both constructivism and personal practical knowledge position teachers as holders and makers of knowledge" (Baxter, 2008, p. 473).

Teacher education programs need "to bridge the pedagogical content …gained from university coursework to authentic implementation strategies in their field experience settings" (Emerson et al., 2018, p. 24). Because White and Kline (2012) found that preservice teachers are underprepared to teach in rural schools, they recommend creating courses that address preservice teachers' understanding:

The links between the classroom, the school, and the wider rural community and their place across these three different contexts—a different set of issues from those that the traditional model of a teacher education and professional experience currently provides. (p. 40)

Knoblauch and Chase (2015) found that the setting of field experience is vital to developing a sense of context when using the strategies learned in class. Providing rural field experiences for preservice teachers is beneficial as it forces an honest reflection about cultural stereotypes (Knoblauch & Chase, 2015; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Additionally, rural field experience placements improve the "contextual knowledge necessary" for rural teachers to be successful (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018, p. 26). Combining coursework that focuses on culturally responsive pedagogy and developing empathy for diverse students with field experience placements in rural schools can create a positive teacher context.

With rural placements, distance can be an issue in university supervisors being present to help preservice teachers. One suggestion from Emerson et al. (2018) is to create structured supports between schools and universities. Cooperating teachers and administrators should be made aware of the content-specific skills taught in the teacher preparation program and encouraged to share relevant teaching strategies with preservice teachers during their field experience (Emerson et al., 2018). Using video conferencing may bridge the physical gap and allow the university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and preservice teacher to "meet" more often and be more present in the day-to-day rhythm of teaching. This technology may be less intrusive and offer a way to record teaching, which can be used by all for reflection and discussion (Hamel, 2012).

Recruiting and Retaining Rural Teachers

Burton and Johnson (2010) argue that more research is needed to fully understand recruitment and retention of rural teachers. Recognizing that rural teaching is not a deficit, but an opportunity to connect with a community, form relationships, and develop new professional identities is important for rural school districts' consideration (Burton & Johnson, 2010). There are many positive factors to teaching in a rural school: low student-teacher ratio, fewer discipline problems, a feeling of more autonomy, and more influence in school policy (Monk, 2007). Focusing on the relationships that can be cultivated and the impact that teachers have in students' lives is another factor to share with new rural teachers. Securing a position in a rural school may be beneficial as the financial benefits, stability of the school, and relationships cultivated can be positive factors.

Building on these factors is important, as the negatives can be difficult to overcome. For example, rural schoolteachers are sometimes expected to be the expert in too many subjects at too many grade levels (Knoblauch & Chase, 2015). Professional development may be scarce, and salaries are often lower than in urban and suburban schools (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). Challenging assumptions about rural teaching and choosing to look at the positives may aid in recruiting new teachers to rural schools.

In geographically poor and isolated areas of the country, policy may make the rural schools unattractive to new teachers, yet these schools are in most need of high-quality teachers who are willing to stay in the community (Cowen et al., 2012). Providing mentoring programs has been identified as a positive support to combat the possibility of leaving (Fry & Anderson, 2011). Teaching is an isolated profession, and new teachers in rural communities need to be supported. Fry and Anderson (2011) argue that the "inherent physical and social characteristics

of rural communities can result in novice teachers in rural areas experiencing unique and perhaps more profound isolation" (p. 1). Typically, there are no grade level partner-teachers or no other teachers in a subject area for high school. Rural schools have a responsibility then to provide opportunities for professional collaboration for all their teachers. Additionally, rural schools must support new teachers in learning the culture of the school and the community to ensure retention (Fry & Anderson, 2011). Stress and burnout from being stretched thin and being responsible for more content can be countered by providing opportunities to build relationships with colleagues (Able & Seawell, 1999; Glover et al., 2016).

Rural schools become the lifeblood of their communities and need to support all teachers (Patterson et al., 2006). Mentoring programs have proven effective in supporting new teachers and rural schools need policies to allocate funds and resources to make this happen (Gallo & Beckman, 2016). Ingwalson and Thompson (2007) share studies that show the heaviest teaching loads are given to the most inexperienced teachers while there is lack of support and a feeling that it is not as bad as one might think. This mindset is crippling for new teachers and perpetuates the notion that teaching is done on an island. To support new rural teachers, principals become key in implementing and supporting mentor programs in the schools (Ingwalson & Thompson, 2007).

New teachers were provided with support as undergraduates and were familiar with having an advisor to guide them and be their sounding board when needed. Taking the positive behaviors from this relationship: being appreciative of the assistance, using humor to alleviate fears and concerns, and setting short term goals can be transferred to the mentor-mentee relationship between veteran teachers and new teachers (Masson & Myers, 2012). When new teachers are mentored, the likelihood of retention increases. Providing new teachers with

opportunities to build relationships with the rest of the staff, meeting first year survival needs, and developing a work-life balance are all important steps in assisting new teachers assimilate to the rural school culture (Savage et al., 2004). Mentoring is good practice and should be implemented in rural schools.

Resident teacher programs may be a good fit for new rural teachers, allowing them a year support and extended professional development while easing into the rural community and creating the relationships necessary for success (Ingwalson & Thompson, 2007). Professional development in rural schools can be challenging because of the distance and isolation from other school communities. Creating resident teacher programs in conjunction with close universities would allow the rural context of professional development to be addressed. Rather than have new teachers attend sporadic professional development workshops that may not fit the needs of rural teachers, a resident teacher program would address rural learning opportunities daily. Additionally, the opportunity for reflection with teachers that know the community and student population can be highly beneficial to the success of the new teacher and students (Glover et al., 2016).

Mentoring

Many mentoring programs loose funding after a year or two, leaving new teachers back in the same boat with little support and too many challenges (Moir, 2003). Creating positive mentoring relationships is always a challenge and in a rural school may be even more difficult as there is limited staff to provide mentoring support (Marker et al., 2013). Mentor programs in rural schools can focus on knowing that "teachers in rural schools have often grown up near the school where they work and may have a passion for working with students in these communities" (Marker et al., 2013, p. 77). When the principal facilitates the mentor relationship

and both the new teacher and mentor know the expectations, the chance of success is much higher. There is greater opportunity for the principal to intentionally communicate with new and veteran staff and support the relationships needed to make mentoring effective (Marker et al., 2013).

Summary

This chapter explored the literature relating to place, teacher preparation, becoming a rural teacher, retention, and mentoring. Reviewing the literature, including an historical piece from 1908, reinforces the longevity of this problem. Preparing and retaining rural teachers is an issue that needs to be continually addressed. In North Dakota, the percentage of rural schools is high, and all of our students deserve a high quality, impactful education.

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CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

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This study looked to gain insight from beginning teachers' experiences in teacher education preparation and implementation of those practices in the participants' first year of teaching. Two beginning teachers from two different rural North Dakota schools were interviewed about their postsecondary training, their experiences as a beginning teacher in the rural schools, and the role place played in determining their level of success in their current position. Chapter III will look at the purpose of the study, the research questions and approach taken, procedures for data collection, plan for data analysis, and the limitations of this study.

As Clandinin (2006) states, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 51). By listening to the stories of the beginning teachers, this study was driven by the overarching question of "how do teachers in a rural school setting experience their beginning years"? The findings are presented as analysis of individual interviews using excerpts from the conversations

between researcher and beginning teachers. Using the stories and analysis, it was hoped to make meaning of the experiences that the beginning teachers shared of their journey from student to teacher. While trying to avoid generalizations of all rural North Dakota beginning teachers, this study intended to show a glimpse of two first year teachers in the field and what really mattered to them as they graduated from their teacher education preparation programs. I chose not to share personal stories or add comments during the interview although the nature of narrative inquiry does support this as it was one factor that would prevent researcher bias (Connelly et al., 1990).

As a veteran teacher with primarily rural teaching experience, my perspective as the researcher has the potential to be biased. Knowing that my experiences could be shared with the participants to give them reassurance, I chose not to share my story. I feared my reactions, positive or negative, may influence how the participants would proceed with their stories. The goal of this research was to hear the whole story of the participants' beginning year without any influence form me. My assumptions and beliefs about rural culture and place are my own; as the researcher I wanted to hear their beliefs in their truest form.

Although I have lived and worked in a rural community, I was not raised in that environment. In essence, I have been a participant observer for more than fifteen years in the rural culture and was eager to learn how place and the beginning teachers' stories intersected. As a novice in the field of teacher education, this is study was a vehicle for me to connect my background and present work.

Using a narrative inquiry approach, I gathered biographical stories from the participants as being context-sensitive is considered essential to narrative inquiry (Czarinawska, 2004, as cited in Creswell et al., 2018, p. 72). The historical context of time and place was the highlighted factor as the stories were gathered. Narrative inquiry asked that researchers try and understand

life events as a process in transition; people, places, and events are always changing and yielding new insight (Clandinin et al., 2007). Focusing on one or two individuals was ideal in this narrative inquiry as it allowed me to focus on those lived stories. Extraction of themes, context of place, time, and culture, and turning points in the participants' lives provided the data needed to analyze the interviews (Creswell et al., 2018).

Place, time, and culture were factors that were important to the research questions. Questions that allowed participants to draw those notions to the front of the discussion were purposefully asked in the interview. Choosing a small number of participants was intentional as supported by Creswell et al. (2018). Identifying participants and gathering data occurred during the 2020-2021 academic year and knowing that it was unusual due to a global pandemic, it would be difficult to find a larger number of participants for this study. Most teachers had additional duties that required more of their time and participating in a research study was not an additional responsibility that was welcomed. Generally speaking, in response to mandates by the Governor of North Dakota, many schools needed to move to distance learning and teachers were more inclined to not become involved with any extra responsibilities at this time. Knowing this would affect my ability to find participants, having a larger population would have provided a more reliable picture of their experiences; however, two participants still provided useful data that can be used as a springboard for future research.

According to Larson (1997), as cited by Coulter et al. (2007), using narrative inquiry in education allows us to examine school problems from a multitude of perspectives. Using these perspectives, one began to make meaning, problem solve, and implement strategies to address the school problems (Coulter et al., 2007). Connely et al. (1990) reiterated the understanding that using narrative inquiry in educational research was fitting as "humans are storytelling organisms

who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Therefore, it was appropriate to use narrative inquiry in this study to gather experiences and make meaning of them.

Does it take a village to raise a teacher? The purpose of the study was to analyze two beginning teachers' stories about their entrance into the teaching profession while considering the impact their teacher education preparation had on their confidence to be successful in a rural setting. Through a narrative inquiry approach, two beginning teachers were interviewed using loosely structured questions designed to draw out stories of their experiences in rural schools. Additionally, questions to elicit stories about their teacher preparation programs were asked to gauge how prepared they felt to teach in the rural setting. Studying the individual's telling of the story allowed a glimpse into the converging of the individual and the social context (Clandinin, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Clandinin et al. (2007) write, "Stories are the form in which we and other teachers and teacher educators most often represent our experiences" (p.33). Listening to beginning teachers tell their stories answered many questions, including: what makes the beginning rural teacher a successful educator? Did the content covered in their teacher education courses contribute to their sense of success in their classrooms? Did a rural field experience contribute to a level of comfort in their rural classroom? Did their own background and desire to return to their home communities outweigh any educational factors? What was the primary factor in choosing a rural school as their first placement to launch their teaching career? Using narrative inquiry allowed for understanding as to how teachers experience their world (Connelly et al.,1990). Thus, the purpose of the study was to learn how the beginning teachers' "construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories" was the product of their education (Connelly et al., 1990, p. 2).

Through the stories that were shared, it was hoped that I would begin to understand the "average everydayness" of the rural teacher (Guignon, 2012, p. 101).

Using the focus of lived experience and providing rich, descriptive text to bring to life beginning rural teachers' stories of how place connects them to their students and community provided a background for teacher educators to enhance current teacher preparation programs (van Manen, 1997). Becoming more conscious of educational places through the lived experiences of beginning teachers provided rich understanding of factors affecting retention in rural midwestern schools (Gruenewald, 2003). Gruenewald (2003) writes, "Places are fundamentally pedagogical because they are contexts for human perception and for participation with the phenomenal, ecological, and cultural world" (p. 645). Beginning rural teachers' experiences differed from their urban counterparts and necessitated a different context of training for success.

Research Questions

These questions stem from the overarching question of "how do teachers in a rural school setting experience their beginning years?" This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do beginning rural teachers experience living and teaching in rural communities?
2. How do beginning rural teachers experience belonging in their school?
3. What are the stories the beginning teachers share about their teacher education preparation program?

Research Approach

As teacher educators, the responsibility to best prepare preservice teachers is paramount. Combining the roles of teacher educator and researcher becomes the catalyst for change in teacher education programs. Understanding the relationship between teacher and student and the transmission of knowledge can lead teacher educators to embrace a constructivist theory at an undergraduate level (Barter, 2008). When teacher education programs provide experiences for their students to build their own knowledge, positive outcomes can occur. Knowing the final outcome is for beginning teachers to feel successful in their classrooms can lead to retention of these teachers.

Additionally, investigating how place shaped beginning teachers' choice of employment may have led to clarification if geography was a factor in retention (Moeller et al., 2016). Ulferts (2016) echoes the sentiment that teacher educators and rural school administrators must understand what influences beginning teachers' desire to choose and stay in a rural school. One of the first major studies to examine teacher retention in rural schools occurred in Australia under Boylan et al. (1993). According to the study, rural teacher retention could be attributed to four influencing areas: within the classroom, whole school, community, and family/personal factors (Boylan et al., 1993). Carefully combining the idea of geographic place and beginning teachers' understandings of desires of support and pinpointing what place influences are strongest may have had an impact on teacher preparation and subsequent retention.

Procedures

Defining the Population

Rural schools in North Dakota were used in this study. Rural schools are defined as having 1000 or fewer students in grades K-12, be in communities with populations fewer than

5,000, and be the only school in the town or county. According to Baxter (2008), defining rural can be more than just limiting to a set number of people in an area, but can consider how the community functions. Recognizing that family, places of worship, and school are central to a rural community can help create a workable definition of rural community. Additionally, understanding that regional differences contributed to the definition must be considered; for instance, rural Appalachian communities are much different than rural midwestern communities (Baxter, 2008). Keeping in mind the connectedness, identity of the culture, interdependence with the land, spirituality, ideology and politics, and civic engagement of the rural community contributed to an understanding of rural (Budge, 2006).

Identifying Participants

Two beginning teachers were chosen to participate in the study. Baker et al. (2012) and Kim (2016) shared the opinion that the quality of the interviews should supersede the quantity of interview subjects. Lawrenence-Lightfoot (1997) explained the necessity of analyzing interview transcripts four times, each time listening with different ears. Sample size can range from one to many, depending on the intent of the research. A smaller number of participants allows for more depth in stories, while a greater number allows for a surface-level understanding of the lived experiences (Baker et al., 2012; Kim, 2016). Finally, Creswell et al. (2018) offered a pragmatic approach of having participants volunteer for the study rather than hand pick them, helping to ensure that the study was not driven by the researcher's bias or influence.

Using the administrative list serve of rural K-12 school districts, an explanatory email was sent to the school district administrators introducing the study and identifying the potential benefits from the information gathered from the participants. The email requested permission to contact beginning teachers in the district to participate in this study. Initial contact with potential

participants was in the form of an email explaining the study and asking for follow up contact if interested. Once the participants expressed an interest, the consent form was emailed, signed, and returned, and the initial interview was scheduled.

Participants needed to be in their first to third year of teaching in a rural school. If they had moved schools during their career, they were not excluded unless they spent time in a suburban or urban school. Participants had graduated from a teacher education program within the last five years and had entered the field immediately upon completion of all North Dakota teaching licensure requirements. Ideally, they graduated from a North Dakota institute of higher education, however, graduation from a neighboring midwestern state did not inhibit participation.

To garner a selection of possible participants, an email was sent to all rural superintendents in North Dakota asking for permission to pass along study information to any beginning teachers in their districts. Six schools ranging in population of 101 to 358 students responded. The two beginning teachers who agreed to participate, Joy and Sue (pseudonyms), finished their first year in schools with K-12 populations of 109 and 110 respectively. They both were eager to share their stories about their first year of teaching. After signing their consent forms, each scheduled a 90-minute interview using Zoom, an online video conferencing platform. Both Joy and Sue were interviewed separately in their final month of the school year.

During the interviews, the researcher discovered that their student teaching experiences were similar, as they completed them during the spring of 2020 amid a global pandemic. This experience was not typical and involved distance learning and their time in the classroom was cut short. Both participants shared positive comments about this unusual finish to a seemingly normal start. This was important to note as it colors their expectations and experiences

differently than typical beginning teachers who experience a full 12-16 week student teaching experience face to face in a classroom.

Interviews

Interviewing participants was the method in which one gathers the stories of the participants' experiences (Connelly et al., 1990). Clandinin (2006) explained that there are range of field texts: "photographs, field notes, and conversation transcripts to interview transcripts" (Clandinin et al., 2000, as cited in Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). As the researcher, I chose to use interview transcripts as my field texts. Those transcripts were then analyzed.

Once participants were identified, interviews were scheduled using the online platform Zoom. Due to a global pandemic that occurred in 2020-2021, in-person interviews were not allowed by the University of North Dakota and the IRB. Participants were familiar with this online platform as the majority of K-12 and post-secondary schools used this as a method of delivering instruction during the 2020-2021 academic year. While I was not allowed to tour the school, classroom, or community to gather observational data, the participants may have felt more comfortable with this method of data collection as they were able to situate their computers or devices in their most comfortable space. Additionally, using the online platform had the ability to record simultaneously without the need for cameras or audio recorders, possibly mitigating the feeling of nervousness one may feel when recorded.

As the researcher, I was interested in what factors influenced beginning teachers in rural schools to stay. Did the relationships they formed keep them there? Did their preservice training provide them with experiences that led them to teach in a rural school? Did they feel prepared to

teach in a rural school? What strategies or relationship connections would have been valuable for school administration to know and use in retaining teachers? What strategies or experiences would be valuable in the field experience for future pre-service teachers based on what they have experienced thus far. Through the interviews, I hoped to find answers to those questions.

Interview questions were semi-structured and allowed for participants' stories, opinions, and perspective to be shared (see Appendix 1). Specific questions regarding teacher education training were also asked to gather insight to the courses and field experiences the teachers received. Interviews were recorded and coded as to reoccurring themes. Teachers were interviewed in a private online session lasting up to 90 minutes. As the researcher, I know this was a short amount of time to spend gathering stories. Ideally, it would have been better to spend a longer amount of time listening. Because of the uniqueness of the 2020-2021 academic year, I knew my ability to find participants who wanted to spend any amount of time on a research study would be challenging. These first year teachers had just finished student teaching in the spring of 2020 when schools were closed by the Governor of North Dakota about ten weeks into their experience. Both participants completed their student teaching using a distance learning format that even the veteran teachers were not necessarily prepared to use.

Starting their beginning year of teaching in 2020, many schools were unsure of what delivery mode would need to be used for teaching. Both participants were fortunate to be in person at the start of their school year, however, both did eventually have to teach using Zoom for a significant portion of the fall of 2020. When the research study invitation was sent out to the schools in early spring, I knew it would be difficult to ask beginning teachers to give up more of their time in the spring. As the researcher and former classroom teacher, I appreciated how

precious personal time was at the end of the school year. I wanted to be respectful of the participants' willingness to commit to this study and not ask for too much time.

No follow-up interviews were needed after the first member check of the transcripts. Looking back to my research questions and considering what I was hoping to have answered, I felt that the participants provided a sufficient amount of data. Both participants began to repeat their answers or ideas as the interview progressed. Some of the questions began to feel redundant in nature and it was sensed the participants were beginning to feel frustrated. I wanted to ensure all their thoughts and stories were gathered and would ask the same question using different words or structure. Near the completion of the interview their tone when answering the final questions became rushed, I sensed the participants were finished sharing their stories. The interviews occurred during the last two weeks of school and both participants had many additional responsibilities to complete for the end of their school year. Based on these reasons, I felt it was not necessary to conduct any follow up interviews. I did receive emailed comments about corrections to make after they had read their own interview transcripts and felt that also supported not needing to conduct additional interviews.

Positionality Credibility and Trustworthiness

As a researcher, I needed to address the ways in which credibility and trustworthiness were ensured in the study, both at the point of data collection and during data analysis.

Positionality of the Researcher

My experience as a veteran rural teacher may have influenced me as the researcher while collecting and analyzing data. During the interviews, I refrained from sharing any of my personal stories or views and responded to the participants' opinions, stories, and thoughts as neutrally as

possible. Participants were selected randomly, however, I had not had them as students at any level, nor were they from schools in which I had been a teacher. Additionally, participants were chosen from schools where I had no personal or professional connections. This helped ensure neutrality in all areas of the interview and data analysis process.

Member Checking

As a way to ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed by sharing the interview transcripts and the summary of the transcripts with the participants to confirm their stories were accurately captured. Next, the participants were asked to review the themes that I had inferred from the interviews to ensure the themes had been accurately identified (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the transcript audit was shared with the researcher's academic advisor. Analysis began; hearing the stories and reflecting on the themes and their meanings brought their experiences to life (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

Frequent Debriefing Sessions

My advisor and I had debriefing sessions via email and Zoom. We used these debriefing sessions as sounding boards for my interpretations of the data, an opportunity for my committee to identify any flaws in my research, and to identify any of my biases that may be emerging (Shenton, 2004). While the researcher is closest to the data and was most familiar with the research, it was important to debrief with my advisor to have a fresh perspective on the data. Meeting virtually as needed allowed for easy access to documents and other data.

Plan for Data Analysis

Using the work of Braun and Clark (2006), Clandinin (2006), Clandinin et al. (2007), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Kim (2016), I chose narrative analysis to analyze the data. The authors suggested that coding works best with interview data, therefore I used inductive coding to discover themes. Lawrenence-Lightfoot (1997) explained the necessity of analyzing interview transcripts four times, each time listening with different ears. Keeping that directive, I did review the transcripts four times, first reading through to understand what was said, and then using the next three reads to code the data.

Using inductive coding with interview data results in themes emerging as it is analyzed rather than fitting the data into preconceived themes (Braun et al., 2006). As the data was coded inductively, the codes, categories, and themes emerged from the "bottom up" (Braun et al., 2006, p. 83). Inductive coding can be thought of as an overarching process of drawing codes from the data (Xu et al., 2020). Searching for codes to paint a rich description of the stories was the goal of this study.

The interview transcripts were transcribed and coded using structural coding to initially discover categories in the data (Saldaña, 2016). The structural coding used provided a "grand tour overview" of the data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 73). Structural coding is appropriate for interview transcripts where semi-structured data gathering was employed and used a conceptual phrase relating to the specific research questions (Saldaña, 2016). The labels, or codes, that are similar were gathered for more analysis and supplied the categories that are detailed in Chapter IV. Following the categorization, the data was thematically analyzed to synthesize the results and begin to uncover over-arching themes (Saldaña, 2016).

As the categories were identified, I used a hierarchical coding frame as an organizational tool (Gibbs, 2011). I chose to take the categories that were somewhat similar and began grouping them into broader categories to see the similarities and gaps between the two data sets. Categories were more detailed and specific, so the hierarchical coding allowed those more specific ideas to be funneled into broader categories which in turn led to another level of funneling to reach the themes.

Themes, as defined by Braun et al. (2006), "capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p. 82). A theme can be counted as the number of times it appears in individual interviews or counted as it appears in the entire data set (Braun et al., 2006). There are six steps identified by Braun et al. (2006) for use in thematic analysis that were employed: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report. The themes are reported in Chapter IV: Discussion of Findings.

Since the researcher cannot be free of the research questions as the coding occurs, theoretical thematic analysis was used (Braun et al., 2006). While the data may be less detailed overall, the theoretical analysis was coded for the specific research questions (Braun et al., 2006). The interview questions were open-ended and allowed for participants to go in any direction they chose, so themes not attached to the research questions may have been found.

As the coding analysis continued, I moved from descriptive coding, which identified patterns in semantics and was summarized, to interpretation where the significance of the patterns was discovered (Braun et al., 2006). It was hoped that the analysis would go even further and reach the latent level of analysis, beyond just identifying themes but identifying

underlying assumptions or ideas (Braun et al., 2006). Using these three levels of coding allowed a deep interpretation of the data.

Saldaña (2016) explained that deciding the amount of data to code varies, as did the amount of experience the researcher has with coding. Knowing that the quantity of data may be significant or not, the quality of the data is the deciding factor in coding. The limitation of this study is the quantity of data; however, it is felt the quality of data is sufficient for data analysis. Charmaz (2008, as cited by Saldaña, 2016) states that line by line coding can be a key to ensuring trustworthiness as it is less likely to have researcher bias appear. While I did not do line by coding, I chose to look sentence by sentence in the transcripts so as not to miss anything significant and ensure with my limited data that I was able to use all the significant pieces in the process. Initially, quantity of data was a consideration in discovering a useful number of codes, however Saldaña (2016) shares Friese's (2014) recommendation of garnering between 50 and 300 codes. The coding process yielded around 300 significant statements to be coded from each interview.

According to Saldaña (2016) the number of categories can range from 25-40 and this study falls in the upper edge of that range. Additionally, the number of themes should be kept to a minimum, however, there is no magic number and Saldaña (2016) offers a range from three to seven. Accordingly, this study extracted three themes. In the end, more time with each participant could have been spent and more stories could have been gathered, yet the stories and experiences that were shared were very similar. Knowing this, it was felt that the data was at a saturation point with repetition of codes and categories. Because of this the data could be depended on to be credible.

As a way to ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed by sharing the interview transcripts and the summary of the transcripts with the participants to confirm their stories were accurately captured. Additionally, the transcript audit was shared with the researcher's academic advisor. Analysis began; hearing the stories and reflecting on the themes and their meanings brought their experiences to life (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997).

Limitations

In terms of limitations, the study was conducted in North Dakota K-12 schools with populations of fewer than 1,000. The study sought participants only from rural North Dakota schools and there were a small number of participants. Participants were from school districts where I had no personal or professional connections. Although the small participant pool was noted as a significant limitation of the study, results may be generalizable in a few neighboring midwestern states. As the sole researcher, rural community member, and veteran teacher in several rural school districts, I felt it was imperative that I did not share any of my experiences, stories, or thoughts about teaching in rural schools. I encouraged the participants to be as honest as possible during the interviews, as they had the opportunity to affect change with the results of the study.

Because the sample size and geographic area of the state was small and limited, it could be assumed this study may not reflect the diversity in teacher education and rural communities. Interviews were completed using the online Zoom platform so there was no travel time or expense. It was anticipated there would be no limitations due to technology as each participant and the researcher used their own devices and internet connections. This research is meant to be conversation starter for continued research in rural teacher education.

Summary

As a researcher, I was interested in what factors influenced beginning teachers in rural schools to stay. This study was important to me as both a doctoral student and teacher educator because I would like to become a more effective educator. I wondered, did the relationships the beginning teachers formed keep them there? Did their teacher education preparation provide them with experiences that led them to teach in rural schools? Did they feel prepared to teach in rural schools? What strategies or relationship connections were valuable for school administration to know and use on the retention of teachers? Through interviews, I hoped to find the answers to those and similar questions. In Chapter IV the findings are presented through the participants' interviews. Themes and categories are explained, connected, and narratively analyzed. The stories take shape and begin to showcase what experiences led to the success of the two beginning teachers.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This narrative inquiry sought to understand what experiences contributed to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district. The two participants, Joy (pseudonym) a first year secondary science teacher, and Sue (pseudonym) first year primary elementary teacher, were interviewed to hear their stories about their rural teaching experiences. Sense of self, sense of belonging, and sense of place are heard loud and clear in the following stories. Both participants spoke to feeling a sense of self, belonging, and place in both their teacher preparation courses and their first teaching position. It was assumed that being trained to teach in a specific place would play a significant role in the success of the participants, however, a sense of belonging was the real key to success. The participants built a number of solid relationships

while teaching and that was ultimately the key in them choosing to return to their respective schools for the coming academic year.

In Chapter IV, I work from large to small by sharing the summary of the interview and identifying the themes as they appear, then explaining the categories that emerged from the data, and finally discussing how the themes and categories are shown together in the interviews. Initially, I sought to organize the interviews according to theme and then realized that presenting the interviews chronologically would allow the reader to experience the storytelling session as I had. The participants became more at ease as they told their stories, and many times more than one theme was supported by the particular excerpt that was chosen to support the data. As you read, you will find I have commented about the theme that best fits the excerpt. What follows the interviews are the categories that emerged from the coding process using excerpts from the interview transcripts. Finally, a narrative analysis discussing the themes that were present in both interviews.

The stories that follow were interesting to hear. Both participants were at ease with the interviews and spoke right into the camera, evidenced by their animated facial expressions and light-hearted tone. When sharing positive or thoughtful stories, they spoke slightly faster and louder and used hand gestures to emphasize their point. Conversely, when they shared stories with a negative undertone, they tended to look away from the camera and use fewer hand gestures. Both participants appeared to enjoy sharing the stories and were thoughtful in their responses.

Both participants attended post-secondary schools in North Dakota and were just completing their first year of teaching. They each had unique student teaching experiences due to the global pandemic that shut schools down during the spring of 2020. It is important to

recognize that they spent less time in the classroom and had to learn how to teach remotely while student teaching. Even though their experiences were not typical, the resulting interviews found that they were genuinely comfortable with the experiences they had.

Process of Reflection

As I read the transcripts and coded the data, I remembered how my teacher education preparation and beginning years of teaching were. I did not want to share my stories with the participants because I wanted to really hear their stories, however, my experiences and biases did color how I chose to code the data. Coming into the research with a preconceived idea that place did affect how successful a teacher could be was the underlying influence as I chose significant statements, categories, and themes.

All of my interactions with my students, colleagues, administrators, and college instructors were in the back of my mind as I reflected on the data and began to find answers to the question of what experiences contribute to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district. I do not journal or write well reflectively, therefore my process of reflection occurred internally as I read and reread the transcripts and data. The following interview summaries are my story of how sense of self, belonging, and place are examples of what beginning teachers need to feel successful in rural school districts.

Joy's Story: A Science Teacher Who Almost Wasn't

As an enthusiastic secondary science teacher in a rural North Dakota school district, Joy (pseudonym) joined the Zoom interview session after her school day was finished. She introduced herself and shared that she had one more week of school and then finals would be starting. She has 40 students who she sees every day during six different science classes. In one of her classes, three out of 10 of her students are on an IEP; otherwise, she has just a few other

students that require significant differentiation. Her classes are made up of predominately Caucasian students with about half of them living in the community or on nearby farms. The rest of her students have open enrolled from the nearest suburban community for a variety of reasons that she was not aware. Joy commutes to school daily, as do the principal and four of the other secondary faculty.

The Beginning of Knowing

Joy sat at her teacher's desk with the chalkboard as her background and listened to my introduction while nodding in acknowledgement. She had a calm about her and was not soft spoken but used a soothing "teacher voice." The interview began by asking her to discuss how her teaching life story unfolded and to include all the stories and details that led her to where she is today. Joy seemed genuinely surprised as she shared that "so first, I never would have thought that I would be a teacher. You couldn't have paid me in high school to go to school for education, so it's kind of funny that I end up finding this position" (personal communication, May 2021). She goes on to share that she received an associate degree in fisheries and wildlife science from an out-of-state community college. In hearing this statement, I felt Joy was acknowledging her sense of self as knew what she did not want to be, yet she recognized the irony of her situation.

After some consideration, Joy decided that an associate degree was not as valuable as she thought and decided to continue her education in fisheries and wildlife at a small university in North Dakota. "So, for me, it's kind of funny because my high school was bigger than both of my colleges were. I graduated from high school with a class of 400. Both of my colleges were smaller than 1600 students. And I really enjoyed that small community" (personal

communication, May 2021). This statement led me to think of how place connected in her history and how she might view her post-secondary education as more intimate than her high school career.

Knowing that the fisheries and wildlife field was competitive and job openings were few and far between in North Dakota and may require many moves, Joy began to question her career path. While in school at the small university in North Dakota, she became involved with an environmental research and education center as a volunteer with the field trip groups that came through the center. Joy found that she really enjoyed working with the students. Combining her new-found confidence in working with students and some positive experiences that she had with her teachers at the university, Joy felt she would like to pursue a biology education major along with her fisheries and wildlife major. The connection to sense of self was evident to me because she was becoming confident in her decision to work with students.

Finding the First Opportunity

After completing her student teaching in the spring of 2020 at a suburban North Dakota high school in the science department with two cooperating teachers, Joy began searching for a teaching position in North Dakota. She found one open position in a rural K-12 school of 109 students that was an easy commute from her home. "This was the first opening I saw, and I applied for it, and I emailed around to other districts because I didn't necessarily want to just take the first job, I saw right away so I emailed other districts and there wasn't anyone that really sounded like they were going to have science openings for the year, and I didn't see anything else pop up" (personal communication 2021). Sense of place is the connection I make to this quote. It appears that place was not a limiting factor for her pursuit of positions, she was willing to shop around and make sure she had a good fit in her first position.

Joy and her significant other very much enjoyed the area where they were living, and she felt accepting the interview was the right move for her. "All of it is interesting because I didn't plan on teaching. I have not had this picture in my mind of me, being a teacher for the past 10 years, it's a newer thing for me, but I went, I did my interview, I felt like, I like the vibe that I got from the superintendent and principal when I did the interview and I knew I liked the area, the commute was good for me. So, it just kind of ended up being the only one that I applied for. Then the only one that I got offered" (personal communication, May 2021). This data demonstrates that Joy has begun to further develop her sense of self and had come to the realization that she was ready to be a teacher. Sense of place also plays into this data as she was not overly concerned about the size or location of the school but felt sure enough of herself to be successful.

The Connection to Place

After hearing the story of the hiring and what led Joy to choose her first position, I inquired about where she was raised. Joy shared that she was from a suburb of a larger city in Minnesota, although she was quick to point out that the "rural-ness" of the suburb did not compare with the "rural-ness" of North Dakota: "it's kind of funny because we were the more rural edge of the suburbs, but obviously it compared to North Dakota not so much but our town was a little bit more spread out like the city I live in" (personal communication, May 2021). She also shared that her graduating class was small for that area at 400, but comparatively larger than the school where she teaches. I make the connection of sense of place to this data as Joy compares rural communities, the one in which she was raised and the one where she teaches. She senses the idea of rurality and how it might affect the feel of life in that place.

The Important Lessons and Experiences in the Community

Next, Joy was asked to share stories about important lessons or experiences that she may have had during her first-year teaching, student teaching, or in field experiences. Joy was quick to answer this question, with no hesitation. She sat up a bit straighter in her chair and very confidently said, "I feel like as a teacher it's just so important to meet your kids at wherever they're at and try to meet their needs and whatever those kind of are because I mean there's so much variation in kids especially like even just student teaching at a different school. I can't teach these kids the same and even between classes and individuals just making sure to meet kids where they are. I think it's so important in terms of them achieving and also building relationships that are mutually beneficial that you guys can get along and learn from each other and the student has a good environment" (personal communication, May 2021). These statements speak of a sense of belonging, as Joy states the importance of building relationships with her students. She is very confident in her sense of knowing her strengths as an educator and how that can affect her teaching.

Wanting to know what kind of experience Joy had in the community where the school was located, she was asked about her involvement in the community. Joy shared that she spends no time in the community outside of the time spent in the school building. She did add that many of the school's students are open enrolled from a more suburban community that is relatively close. Because of the small enrollment, there are not enough students to support any high school athletic or extracurricular teams or clubs. Due to the low enrollment, the students in the school where Joy teaches travel and co-op with another rural school for sports and activities, playing games and holding competitions in that community, thus the distance to travel and be a part of that community is something Joy is not willing to do at this time. She did express a desire to attend events and support her students if the events were in the school community. Sense of

place is felt as a connection in this data. I feel that while Joy is not involved in the community, she does explain that she would like to if there was less of a geographical distance to cover. She does seem to understand the importance of being involved in her students' lives in this sense yet understands her own limits in regard to time and place as well.

Teacher Preparation: The Good and the Bad

After listening to stories about Joy's current school year, I asked to share her stories about the best and worst experiences during her teacher preparation. Joy took a moment to think and then jumped in with enthusiasm with a story about her first field experience that began as just an observation but morphed into her best memory. "So, it was like my first year of education classes and for me I wasn't totally decided at this point. I had a teacher that I was placed with that was just totally enthusiastic about everything. And normally during that Education 100 level class you're only doing observations. And he had me plan a unit to do for one of his classes which was way more than I expected or maybe was ready for, but he was very supportive and he had a class that he was kind of playing around with changing the format of, so he was kind of open to trying new and different things and I thought that was really beneficial that early on because then I get a little more experience. Well, I tried this and this went well, and this didn't go well, but getting that early on I really enjoyed it and he was just a really great teacher to work with and I think that was a really positive experience" (personal communication, May 2021). I feel this piece of data reflects Joy's sense of self and her ability to begin to see herself as a teacher. She is beginning to understand her strengths as an educator and realized the impact the

freedom to teach had on her mindset as a preservice teacher. Joy knows that she benefits from creating new learning experiences for her students.

Conversely, Joy went on to share a story about the level of rigor in her education classes compared to her fisheries and wildlife courses and her disappointment in the lack expectations she felt her teacher education course instructors held for the students. She spoke of how she appreciated a level of challenge in her courses and felt it was absent at all levels of her teacher education instruction. "I just really struggled with a lot of the lower-level education classes, because I didn't feel like they pushed me in a way that challenged myself. I felt like as long as I get here to class everyday by 8:00 a.m. no matter what I do, I'm gonna get an A in this class, I don't need to study hard for tests. I don't need to work really hard to put this project together it just felt very simple, and I struggle with that, I didn't enjoy it because it didn't challenge me" (personal communication, May 2021). Joy's sense of self and knowing what she needed to be successful in her coursework are evidenced in this data. She knew she needed to be challenged and was not. This is a telling moment for me to hear as a teacher educator; I felt like I should reflect on my expectations for my own students.

First Year of Teaching: The Good and the Bad

After Joy shared stories of her teacher preparation experiences, she was asked to share stories of her best and worst experiences during her first-year teaching. Again, she took a moment to collect her thoughts, sat up straighter in her chair, and broke out in a broad grin as she began talking about the field trips that she took her secondary science students on in the fall of the year.

Because of her volunteer relationship with the environmental research and education center, she felt her students would enjoy going to that facility, and she was right. "There were two different days where we did field trips, and it was just so fun to watch the kids just totally light up and be engaged. So, we went with the 7th through 10th graders. We went to environmental research and education center, where I'd done field trips before, which is fun because I got to pick and choose activities. These are the ones I've done before that I think will meet my students' interests and stuff and that was just super fun. I mean, they're kids and it's October, you don't know them yet. Well, they haven't really lit up or opened up in class but to see them with an ear-to-ear grin, we were in the water, catching fish and invertebrates and stuff like that and to see that kind of reaction from them was just so rewarding. They were just so excited, and they still last week there was a student that was saying, yeah, that was the best thing that we've done all year was going on that field trip" (personal communication, May 2021). This story speaks loudly to the sense of belonging. I feel this is one of the most significant stories from the interview that highlights the sense of belonging and building of relationships. I loved that she was so excited to tell about her excitement when she was able to observe her students' engagement.

While Joy had no specific stories to share about her worst moments teaching during her first year, she did slump down in her chair, look away from the camera, and explain that she struggled most with the poor attitudes that some of her students had in her classes. "I have a couple particular students that there have been days with the attitude, where if I could have just walked out of the room and sat in the break room for the remaining 20 minutes of class I would have loved that" (personal communication, May 2021). This sentiment speaks to the sense of self in her knowing what she needed to do as a teacher to help her get through her day. I also see this

speaking to her sense of belonging as she knows her students well enough to understand they will have good and difficult days and she wants to support them.

The resignation in her voice with the last statement was palpable so I asked if she had any resources or strategies that she had learned that she may have used with these students. Again, the resignation in her voice was palpable when she said, "I honestly don't feel like any of that I really struggled with in the teacher classes, I felt like they didn't cover a lot of material that I felt was super applicable … it seemed like it was at a really low level … I don't feel like many of my teacher prep classes at college helped me with that" (personal communication, May 2021). While this is brutally honest and sheds a negative light on teacher education, I did appreciate her awareness of her sense of self. She understood her learning style and knew that she needed to be challenged and that she felt she did not have the skill set needed to be successful in her classroom.

Mentoring and Relationships

As the interview continued, Joy was asked about her participation in a mentor program. Joy eagerly began describing how she participated in two programs that her principal had offered and was appreciative of the support she was given by her in-school mentor. "So, it's been a very beneficial mentorship because we both very much looked for the positive and not the negative. And so, our sessions, I don't think almost ever turned into just a straight complaining fest, which I really appreciate, because it can be that way with other people sometimes. So, it's kind of nice to have that better gauge for the students as well than I do from working with them for six or seven months and he's had four or five years" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of belonging was very evident in this statement. I understood how important having a like-minded mentor could be and Joy's comments reinforced that idea. According to further conversation, Joy

is unsure if she will continue in a formal mentor program due to the time commitment and availability in her school.

Time in the Field: Rural? Urban? Did it Matter?

As stories about Joy's experience in the mentor program came to a close, the conversation segued to her experiences in the teacher education preparation courses. She was quick to state that hers was a unique situation as she was a transfer student who had added another major. She and I had a conversation about the order of her course work, when and where any field experiences took place, and if she had any specific field experiences in rural, suburban, or urban schools. Joy chronicled her time in the field as beginning in her first education course where she was able to teach a unit and not just observe. Next, in her diversity course, the class took a field trip to the closest urban area and spent three days in three different schools. Joy described the experience as it "wasn't necessarily us observing students more, I don't know that I would really count them as practical days…. We didn't interact or observe any classrooms but more so learn about their platform and how they did things with technology" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of place is evidenced by her reference to spending time in an urban setting. Sense of self also shows through as she is aware of what she needs as a teacher education student, knowing she needed more time observing students rather than observing technology. It appeared that Joy felt the time in the field was maybe not what she had really expected and did not seem to contribute or take away from her feelings of success as a teacher.

She went on to indicate that some of her volunteer time at an environmental research and education center was able to be counted toward her field experience requirement. Finally, she explained how she spent the rest of her 40 required hours with the teacher she was placed with for her student teaching experience. When asked if she had any field experiences in a rural

setting, she quickly replied "no." Although Joy does not go into great detail, sense of place is inferred from this part of our conversation. I felt she has no real background or prior knowledge to draw from as she begins her teaching career, yet it does not seem to negatively affect her feelings of success in her classroom.

As a follow up to the lack of a rural field experience, I asked Joy if she felt that any of her instructors specifically addressed how rural and urban teaching might differ. Joy looked beyond the camera for a moment and appeared to be gathering her thoughts as she situated herself in her chair and adjusted her monitor. "I feel like the teachers that were teaching them, they referenced schools they had taught in their experiences that was the background that they brought in, and a lot of that was geared toward that. It was what they taught and maybe some of them did teach in large suburban cities in North Dakota. … But, yes, I feel like the experiences and background that they brought in made it more, that was their experience. So, that was what it was geared towards" (personal communication, May 2021). As I listened to Joy's thoughts, I felt sense of place come through because she was linking her instructors' experience with where they gained their experience. She is understanding how sense of place allows teachers to connect to students' prior knowledge.

As a follow up to her response, Joy was asked if she felt prepared to teach in a rural setting and she responded, "I feel very fortunate and I just love working in this setting and I feel ready to handle that in terms of content, though I think if I did three preps instead of six then that would be my perfect level" (personal communication, May 2021). Here Joy is very enthusiastic, and I feel she really knows herself in this comment. Her sense of self knowing her perfect level of teaching is evident. Additionally, sense of place shines through as I can infer that Joy is comfortable in the rural setting.

Joy went on to clarify "I wouldn't have thought that I would have enjoyed teaching six different classes and having the variation of my day, I would have thought wouldn't it be great if I could do all do one prep in the morning, get all that done and just rinse and repeat throughout the day. But I do obviously do all the prep work and it is a challenge, but I enjoy the diversity and I also enjoy that as the only science teacher I can do whatever I want with my students. We don't have to take the test on Tuesday, and it does not have to be the same test as any other teacher's test. I can have so much more control and flexibility especially with the administration that I have. They are really open to us teaching whatever way we think is best and whatever works best for our kids" (personal communication, May 2021). During this portion of the session, it was very evident that Joy felt confident in her abilities to teach, which shows her sense of self is becoming more developed. Also, her sense of belonging is strong in this statement as feels very supported by her administration. This was a significant piece of data as it really summed up much of her feeling successful in her first year of teaching.

She also stated "Sure, you know that your biology class stays identical to the other sections in a suburban or urban school. I think I'd struggle with that at a bigger school" (personal communication, May 2021). I feel that Joy is really coming to understand how her sense of self and place are beginning to intertwine. She is comfortable with the rural school and knows that she feels successful teaching in that environment.

Support: The Key to Success

After hearing stories about teacher education preparation and the first year, Joy was asked about how supported she felt in her position. Taking a moment to collect her thoughts, Joy looked into the camera and began to identify the many ways in which she felt supported by her colleagues and administration during her first year of teaching. "I feel supported by my

colleagues" (personal communication, May 2021). Her sense of belonging is very clear here as there was no hesitation in her response.

Regarding administration, the amount of support is "…lots. Lots of freedom and flexibility to teach and do different things, the way that I want to. And even like next year, I'm doing stem class instead of physics because we don't really do well with math at our school. So, physics is just applied math. So, let's find a science credit that fits our students needs more so than a physics class, which a lot of them don't have a lot of use for. So, I feel very supported by Administration to do whatever I need to be successful and have our students be successful as well" (personal communication, May 2021). This is another significant piece of data as sense of belonging and self are shown. I feel the permission from her administration to meet her students where they are was a huge piece in her feeling like she belonged. Because she knows her students so well, I feel that her sense of self is evident because she knows what kind of class to create for her students and how to accomplish it.

Her response to questions about parental support took a different flavor: "So the parents at our school, they're involved for the seventh and eighth graders. I don't know if I contact a parent from ninth through twelfth grade even once a month or hear from a parent from nine to twelve once a month. So it's very much so disengaged which is frustrating with some of our students who are struggling and we need some support from home, maybe to kick things into gear and you don't necessarily get that back up that you'd like to see or it's hard to say. But there are some students whose parents reach out and ask about assignments, or ask about getting extra help and stuff, but they're definitely the rarity of the parents" (personal communication, May 2021). While it is not positive in nature, the sense of belonging is shown here. She does not have

the support she wants and is not sure how to go about cultivating it. She seems to be missing that connection and knows she needs it.

As the interview concluded, the researcher asked if Joy had signed her contract for the upcoming school year. Her response was yes, and she added "like I said, I'm just so happy to have a principle that lets me teach however I want … I appreciate how small we are … I don't know if I'd want to be teaching at any school where I had a larger class size. So, I'm really happy with all those things about this school" (personal communication, May 2021). This final statement showcases how sense of self, belonging, and place all connect. Joy knows she thrived in this accepting environment. She knows this place makes her happy.

I gather from this interview that Joy truly loves teaching in her place and understands what she needs to be successful. She has grown in her sense of self over the school year knowing that she does best with support and knowing that her talent is valued and respected. Her success with the field trips with her students and support from her administration to really meet her students where they are were significant contributors to her feeling success in her first year of teaching.

Sue's Story: Masks and COVID and Distance Learning, Oh My!

Sue (pseudonym) is a primary grade elementary teacher in a small rural North Dakota school district and had 19 students in her first year. Her bubbly personality shined through as she introduced herself on the Zoom interview that was held two weeks before her school year was finished. Sue was in a room with a white background, she would occasionally adjust her monitor and was animated in her gestures and tone as she shared her stories. She and I had previously met while Sue was in her second to last semester at a small university in North Dakota. She

listened quietly while I shared the purpose of the study, asked for questions, and informed her of the process of the interview.

The Beginning of a Teaching Career: I Knew I Wanted to Do That!

The interview began with me asking her to share how her teaching life story unfolded. Sue sat a bit straighter, looked into the camera, and began "Yeah, okay, the moment I knew I for sure, I've always kind of thought about being a teacher, but the moment that I knew for sure I wanted to do it was, it was my after my sophomore year of high school. During my sophomore year of high school, I did a program through a local high school … where you go into the school, and you just help a teacher and you do just little things. It's being in there. It's making copies, it's fun things, whatever. And I actually got placed in my little brother's classroom. He was a first grader at the time, and I knew that was kind of the age I wanted to be around the younger kids. I got placed in Mrs. B's (pseudonym) classroom, my sophomore year. And after watching her teach it was kind of like, I want to do that. I want to be, I want to be like Mrs. B. I wanted to be phenomenal and she still is, and I think Mrs. B has a lot to do with… how I teach and the teacher I am today, so I did that my sophomore year" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue's sense of self is evident here as she is confident in her choice to become a teacher. She knows that she wants to be like her mentor teacher, and I feel that the sense of belonging is important to her because she holds Mrs. B in such high regard.

After that experience, Sue shared another defining experience that helped affirm her desire to be an educator. "And then my junior year, I took a class that was called caretaking and something and that was where we got to run a preschool for eight weeks and then go into the schools again for the other eight week and I was in kindergarten for those other eight weeks. Yeah, as your junior year approaches, you kind of start thinking more about, what do you want to

do? Where do you want to go to college all of that stuff? And so, I was focusing in on and deciding that is something I would want to do that would be good for me" (personal communication, May 2021). The data here shows Sue's sense of self again in her confidence in choosing to become a teacher. She also shows that she is capable of some self-reflection as she shared that she wanted to do something that was good for her.

Finally, Sue's experience during her senior year confirmed her desire to go into education: "I took another class in the schools where we were just allowed you to go back in and I kind of just observed different schools, different classes, different things. And it kind of confirmed that this is what I wanted to do" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue continues to share her strong sense of self in knowing that teaching is the right career choice.

Hometown it is! Headed to the University

While exploring her postsecondary schooling options, Sue was determined to not attend her hometown university. She wanted to experience all the things a larger university could offer. As communication with her parents continued, they suggested "just touring Small Hometown University (pseudonym), just see like, let's go one time. You don't have to make any decisions, you can just tour. After the tour, I did really like it" (personal communication, May 2021). The sense of place is evident here as Sue wants to stretch her wings and experience a larger locale. Although she feels that she may miss out on important experiences that occur in larger universities, she begins to recognize that she appreciates a smaller school.

When asked what she liked about it, Sue replied, "And I liked the smaller instruction in the, the smaller class size that it was going to be more personable. You weren't just one person in 400. You were going to be a student, and you'd have relationships with your professors, and they

would know who you were, and that kind of thing" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue's need to feel like she belongs is showcased in this data. Her sense of self is also shown here as she knows that she learns best in a smaller environment. She also realizes how important belonging and having relationships are to her success as a student.

As Sue's freshman year of college began at Small Hometown University, she had an unexpected opportunity: "In September I actually started working for America Reads through school. They asked me if I would do it. They said we think you'd be good at this. Can we email Mr. A (pseudonym)? And you can go down to America Reads Elementary School (pseudonym) and I was like, sure, I would do that for a work study, that would be a fun one. I did end up doing that. Then Mr. A asked me to work at the after-school program at America Reads Elementary School and I ended up getting hired for the after-school program, but at a different elementary school. So, then I worked there for about a year and a half" (personal communication, May 2021). I see in this data a sense of belonging. I can infer that Sue feels included or recognized for her skill set in teaching because she was picked for the position. She is feeling valued and appreciated for her skill set in working with children. She is beginning to fell success in her ability as an educator.

Sue continued to tell her story adding "and then, in March of my sophomore year of college, I got promoted to run the program at the elementary school. So, I ran that one for my sophomore year through my senior year, well, until I started teaching. But I really think that that program is the most influential on how I was able to get a job out of college. The reason I was able to succeed is because I did have that job and I worked at it all four years of college. And it was when it was my senior year, when I was running the program, we had 73 kids. It runs from three to six in the evening and they're funded for a lot of lower income families, and so, there's a

lot of behaviors, a lot of those different things that you kind of learn to deal with as you're working, and you don't have the space. I mean there's not a classroom out there that's meant for 73 elementary students and it ranged from K-5. So, running that program kind of lets you get that feel of what you really did like" (personal communication, May 2021). This story recognizes Sue's sense of self and place as she contributes her success in teaching to the experience, she gained in working at this facility. Her sense of place is an underlying theme in this data because Sue took time to explain the physical space and how it affected her ability to teach.

Sue explained that she completed her student teaching experience with the same teacher, Mrs. B, whose classroom she had spent time in as a junior in high school. She had a very positive experience and gives much credit for how successful and confident she felt this year because "she was wonderful. She taught me so many things that I have transferred over to my classroom this year, which was awesome because even though I student taught at the primary level, there's things you can take, and you can put them at my current grade level. You can … change them a little, but the ideas, the stuff behind it, a lot of it does go to her and a lot of it does go to working at the after-school program" (personal communication, May 2021). Here Sue's sense of self and belonging are evidenced. Knowing she has the tools to teach in a variety of situations supports Sue's sense of self. She knows what she needs to be successful. I feel that Sue's sense of belonging is apparent here because she contributes much of her success to her mentor teacher with whom she had built a strong relationship.

Sue Said Yes: Her First Purple Classroom

After Sue had shared her story of how and why she determined education would be a good career for her, she was asked to tell the story of how she chose her first teaching position. During this portion of the interview, Sue was animated, looked into the camera frequently, and

had a smile as she spoke. She had reiterated that she was not interested in working in a rural school, was prepared to move away from her hometown, and preferred to begin teaching in a more suburban school, much like the one where she spent her student teaching experience and where she managed the after-school program. "And then when I interviewed for the job out there where I am currently employed, I don't know, there was something that just I was never going to apply. I would have never applied out there … but …the principal actually reached out to me and said that she saw I worked with two ladies she knew and that she used to work in my hometown, and she asked me to call her and see it. Just talk about my plans for the next year and I kind of just told her …I was applying for, I just started applying for places like some major suburban cities as a way to get out of my hometown and I picked the one I picked, the small rural school where I teach, over a suburban city" (personal communication, May 2021). This piece of data speaks to sense of place. Sue was not tied to any geographic place, although she did have reasons for choosing a particular setting. I think she surprised herself by choosing the rural school. She clearly appreciates being chosen for positions. Sense of self and belonging are developed again as she is hand-picked to come and interview for this setting. She feels successful because others have identified that in her already.

As a clarifying question, I asked why she picked the small rural school over the suburban city school. Sue replied "It had a lot to do with, I felt like it is bad to say, but like the quality of people, it almost seems like, you've been talking on the phone …the suburban city interview was over Zoom because of COVID and stuff. The small rural school interview was in person, they just limited the people who were allowed there. I just feel like the administrators at small rural school were a lot more welcoming and friendly, then the school in the suburban city, and it was just a different, but part of, it was also that the suburban city position was an upper elementary

position and small rural school was lower elementary. So, grade-level had to do with it, but the atmosphere felt more right for me at the small rural school then the suburban city" (personal communication, May 2021). For Sue's story, this is a significant piece of data to support sense of belonging. She chose her position based on feeling that she belonged in that setting.

As the interview progressed, Sue recounted the details that went into her feeling confident for the interview with the small rural school. She spoke highly of her cooperating teacher's confidence in her and the assistance she received in preparing for the interview. Sue detailed the process the principal went through to connect with her to set up the interview. During the story, Sue highlighted a part of the interview that was particularly important to her: "And then I went out and they interviewed, and it went really well. I liked that they showed me the school, they kind of showed me the classroom and one thing I really did like, it's strange to say this because you wouldn't think of it as something, … but the colored classrooms. Like how each teacher is allowed to pick the color of their walls is just something I never grew up having in my hometown school, they are all that monotone, grayish color. It's just like some teachers are good at decorating, but they were letting you pick like the color of the walls and that was just not something you see at bigger schools that kind of, it's your classroom. We want you to pick it. That kind of thing that I thought was really just a neat thing that they offered. As small as it is, I think it was something that makes it welcoming" (personal communication, May 2021). I might usually think of place as a larger, more ambiguous idea, however in this data Sue's sense place is her being able to personalize her classroom. Sue had the power to make this place her own and that was a significant factor in her choosing to teach in the rural place.

When I asked about accepting the position, Sue smiled broadly and said, "I did leave my classroom the way it was because purple is my favorite color so I thought … well it's already

purple… might as well take the job" (personal communication, May 2021). I chuckled when Sue shared this. I remembered when I began teaching and making my classroom place my own was a very important component of teaching. Sue's taking the job because her classroom space was finished to her liking struck me that she felt like she really belonged in that place.

Sue was also asked during the interview "about why I thought I'd fit in with the Class B school when I am from a Class A school, like how I would transition" (personal communication, May 2021). Her response to the principal included a story about her friendship with a girl from a Class B school and her understanding of the Class B social system. Sue concluded her story by sharing that she did accept the position and spoke with the principal "he's like, you can think about it and I was like, no, no we're good… I just kind of like went with the gut. Yeah, I'll take it and they sent the contract" (personal communication, May 2021). This piece of data reiterates how the rural and urban culture are prevalent in North Dakota. It exemplifies how important it is to know and understand that sense of place can be the deciding factor in being offered a position in a community. Sue felt qualified to teach in the Class B setting based on her intimate knowledge of the community through her friendship. Beginning her teaching career in a rural school with prior knowledge of the place set her up for success.

Teaching and Coaching: A Balancing Act

Sue's 19 students are primarily Caucasian, live in the rural community or on nearby farms, and three of them are on an IEP. In addition to her duties as a first-year elementary teacher, Sue was asked by her principal after she had accepted the teaching position if she would be willing to coach junior varsity volleyball. Hesitantly she agreed, however she shared concerns with the principal that she was nervous about being both a first-year teacher and the head junior varsity volleyball coach. Her fears were alleviated during this conversation: "I got another phone

call asking me if I would coach volleyball and I was like, oh, I don't know if I can do that. You know, he's like no, the volleyball coach knows you from high school …. So, then it was like, oh she knows who you are, and she knows that you actually know about the game, and she wants someone who knows something. Will you please coach? I asked how's that going to work with first year teaching? I don't know how to get a sub. I don't know how you do all this stuff. He was like, if you say, yes, we'll make it work. And so, I said yes to that too" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue's sense of self in knowing her limitations are shown here. She knows that she may not be as successful as she would like to be if she accepts this additional responsibility. When Sue is recognized by others as being a good candidate for the coaching position, it shows how the sense of belonging can be felt. I can infer that Sue feels like she was personally chosen and belongs to this rural community now.

Masks and COVID and Distance, Oh My!

Being fully immersed in the small rural school as both a new teacher and new head junior varsity coach had the potential to be overwhelming; however, Sue's first fall of teaching also was affected by COVID and the restrictions that the state implemented. While Sue was adjusting to balancing teaching and coaching, she also was navigating how to teach her students remotely as the cycled through close contact quarantines, COVID infections, and various levels of social distancing and mask wearing. Sue explained how she felt as the year unfolded: "they don't teach you that in college… like how to teach the ten kids you have in person and the eight kids you have online. That's not something they teach you. Make sure you're uploading assignments for the eight kids on Google Classroom who don't always know how to spell their last name to log on, but while also teaching the ten that are here and make sure you get it all in. Make piles so that you can send work home on each kids' bus route. All the different things each week was the

stuff you never get prepared for. No school can prepare you for a global pandemic that you're gonna teach in" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue's sense of self shines through here as she readily admits to not being prepared to teach in a global pandemic. I feel that she has a very solid sense of her strengths as a beginning teacher, and distance teaching is not one of them.

COVID colored Sue's first year teaching experience as most of her stories chronicled the degrees of masking and social distancing. She was quick to add that nothing had prepared her for this unique way to teach. Sue contracted COVID right as the small rural school was beginning a week of distance learning. She shared "I was exhausted by the end of it, and it was just one of those things that they didn't teach you, like how to teach online while also, you're extremely sick and make yourself look presentable. They also didn't teach you how hard it is to teach 19 students on a computer, because they all are, showing you their house or they get up to go to the bathroom or their animal comes or their sibling is on school, too. And all the distractions that come with it. I don't know how the teachers did it last year, because I did it for one week and I was like I don't think I could do this…. this would not be for me if it was every week. They know I'm more of an in-person teacher but then when we did go back, we did the mask mandate" (personal communication, May 2021). Here again, Sue is very straightforward in knowing her limitations as a teacher. Her sense of self is strong when she recognizes that she is more effective when she teaches in a classroom rather than online. She appears to feel successful and wears this "getting through" as a badge of honor for all the unique expectations that she was able to meet.

Wearing masks was now required for all teachers and students. While Sue abided by all the mandates, she did notice the differences in her students and how she taught: "now that we actually do have to wear these masks, I think the worst part was not seeing their smiles or their laughs… like their expression on their faces. You couldn't see those 'aha moments' or the happy

moments with their friends because it is covered up with a mask. You can tell by a person's eyes how they feel, but it's not completely the same. I think that was hard for some of the kids to handle. I mean they did a really good job about wearing it. Those kids that do rely on seeing other kids' emotions, you know that connection they have with people at school, they might not have at home. When school is, the only connection you get and then you kind of take it away and ask them, it was difficult to watch some of these kids struggle because of it. It wasn't very enjoyable, and it was hard to teach …when you have kids that read your lips" (personal communication, May 2021). Here Sue really understands the importance of the sense of belonging. She wants to create a connection and community of learners in her classroom but struggles because she is limited in her amount and type of contact, she has with her students.

"So, there I was really hoping that was one little hiccup with COVID, but it could be a whole year. I think at the beginning of the year, when they were telling us, oh, you can't collaborate with other classes that you got to stay, you know, in your zone for contact tracing all that stuff. It was hard because it was hard not to do things with other teachers, or to learn who the other kids in the school were, that kind of stuff for me. Whereas, now, as its kind of started to open and we can do stuff, it's a lot more. I mean, obviously the school year's over … but I think it was tough to not be able to collaborate with other teachers, to as a first-year teacher" (personal communication, May 2021). I can sense the struggle Sue felt with not being able to create relationships with her students and colleagues in a way she comfortable. Her sense of belonging was thrown off because of the mandates and I inferred this was uncomfortable for her.

Interacting…the good and the not so good

Sue's ability to not collaborate with her colleagues was a challenge and as she spoke about this, she became more animated. She continued her story: "But I think the interacting with

other kids and other classes is such a big part of school too. When you take that away and you're just the only one with these 18 kids and you can't go outside this room, you know that's like when you're trapped at home with your just your siblings. I get all like I don't want to be with these people anymore. You know, you just need a break from it. It's a long time from 8:30 to 3:30 to spend with the same people in a room. You're like, okay, you're allowed to take a break, but overall it's been a really good year" (personal communication, May 2021). Here Sue's sense of self and belonging are evident. She understands what she went through as a child and how it relates to her students in this unusual school year. I feel that Sue is a social person who needs to be fully present among people and that was not something she was willing to forgo.

Connections and Colleagues

After listening to the stories about how COVID affected Sue's ability to teach face-to-face, feel connected to her students and colleagues, and learn new ways to teach remotely, I asked how supported Sue felt by her colleagues and administration. She was quick to respond and adjusted herself and monitor as she spoke: "I think part of the reason I really do like the school is how well I get along with the other teachers, how supportive they are. When they said they had a good staff I wasn't sure. I think each teacher has different areas that they are strong in and it might not always be the content. The support that the other teachers have shown for me is a lot different than other schools. I think that it's … there's just a dynamic that they're there for you. I've gone home sick sometimes or been sick a couple days from the school … or I've been out and … they'll text me or they'll call me to make sure I'm okay, those kind of things, and it's not just one or two of them, it's all of them that support me. It's the kindergarten through sixth grade teachers that are there to make sure I am ok. That's just a different kind of experience to know. Like, … that many teachers that are actually looking out for you, that you have

relationships with them. You can go to them as mentors and colleagues, and look for advice, or how to handle this, or what to do about this. That it's not just like, oh, I have a problem, I have to go to admin. You can go to the teachers that have been there and that know what they're doing. That kind of thing" (personal communication, May 2021). This was a significant piece of data in Sue's sense of belonging. I feel this story strongly emphasizes how much Sue felt like she belonged in this school. She needs the connection and was successful in creating and maintain close personal relationships.

Hometown University, Not Quite What She Had Hoped

After hearing how Sue chose her first position, experienced memorable events during her first year, and provided examples of support by her colleagues and administration, she was asked to share stories about her teacher preparation while attending her hometown university. She expressed some frustration with the instructors in the program: "we were taught by adjuncts and not saying adjuncts can't be good, but it's just different. When one year you have this adjunct for math and the next, it's a different one and then you're learning a lot of different things" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of self is found here as Sue expresses her frustration in not having consistent teaching. She knows that she needs a defined level of expectation and is not reaching it.

Additionally, Sue's perception of her professor's expectations appeared to be frustrating to her as evidenced by her following comments: "That's not realistic what they expected from us. I think as the professors started being more consistent, and it did start getting better. There were more professors that have actual expectations in this class. It's not just for people who are going to be coaches. Because I think some people go into teaching to be a coach and they think it'll be an easier job. I know how to add. I can teach a kid. Where they don't consider all the other

aspects of teaching. When the classes are easy to take, it's like, oh why not take them? You know, this isn't easy degree" (personal communication, May 2021). Again, sense of self is shown here in Sue's inability to feel confident in knowing the expectations. I think it is important to note that she appears to be offended that others take entering the teaching profession so lightly. Sue has high expectations for herself and wants others to do the same.

Field experience is a requirement of teacher education programs and Sue was asked to describe her experiences as she practiced teaching. She explained that the structure of her hometown university's teacher education program changed just as she was preparing to student teach. As she sat up straighter and looked the camera squarely in the eye, her tone changed from light-hearted to a hint of frustration: "I got to experience that lovely small rural school situation where we went once a month for four months, which was honestly, a nightmare. I think it's just hard that way. It wasn't how I think. It was hard because you're there once a month for four months. What relationships are you supposed to build with the students when you see them one time? Then another month later, you see them again. If you're going to remember their name, you might, if you're good at that. But if you struggle with needing to see them on a consistent basis, then it's different too. It's like, oh, you're just this lady that comes in once a month and sometimes watches us and is sometimes gonna teach" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of belonging is strongly supported with this data. Sue's description that her experience was a nightmare exemplifies how important creating meaningful relationships is to her. She knows from her previous experiences with students and children that she needs time and consistency to create and maintain relationships.

Time in the Field: Rural, Urban, Not Enough

During the 2020-2021 school year, students from Sue's hometown university came to her small rural school to complete their field experience. Sue was quick to share how much that experience differed from hers: "then this year's practicum students come to small rural school for a week straight. I think that was a way better fit. Because you could see that by the end of the week, the students really did get to know their person… because it was a consistent week. It wasn't just one time. It's easy for some people to build relationships but it's not for others" (personal communication, May 2021). Here is another striking example of how important a sense of belonging is to Sue. She is quick to point out that consistency and time really matter to her in building relationships.

As a follow up question, I asked if Sue had spent any of her field experience in a suburban environment. She listed hours that she had completed in her suburban sized hometown school with a casual disinterest. I got the feeling that Sue was very content and felt successful in her rural school based on her reaction to the follow up question, even though it did not go quite as she had planned.

Preparation for All the Places and Things

Using the question about a suburban field experience was a segue to the next story she was asked to share about her perception of how prepared she felt to teach in a rural and suburban environment. "I don't think delivering the content is different between student teaching and … teaching in a suburban school and teaching in a rural school. I don't think that the delivery of instruction is different. I think that teachers nowadays are kind of adapting and it's all balancing. That balance between whole group and small group and delivering the instruction" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of place is shown in this statement as not being important in being a successful teacher. She seemed to understand that delivery of instruction was not focused

on place but on ability to balance the needs of her students. Here Sue explains it is not where you but how you are that makes it right for her students.

Sue very quickly followed up with her most observable difference: "I think the biggest thing is the students' interest, that's what I've noticed is different between small schools and bigger schools. Knowing that the students' interest is going to be in farming and that kind of stuff out in the rural areas. Because that's what they grow up. When they grow up on a farm, they grow up with their animals and all that kind of stuff. So, it's a lot of farming and sports, whereas in suburban areas, it's more different activities. It's just more of the relationships aspect that I think is a little different, because it's just knowing what to expect that they're going to want to talk to you about that. They're going to want to share with you, so just different kind of things. I don't think the content is different though in the teaching, because I think that they are students" (personal communication, May 2021). As a contrast, here sense of place is a huge determining factor in how to be a successful teacher for Sue. She has to know where her students come from to begin creating meaningful relationships with them. She truly understands that her students are bringing place specific prior knowledge to their classroom.

She noted specific similarities from her general knowledge of teaching and her experiences: "There's rules in every class, suburban, urban, it doesn't matter. You are always going to have high kids and you're always going to have low kids… you're always going to have those middle kids … here and there no matter what school you're teaching at, and it's just how you adapt to those kids" (personal communication, May 2021). This is a telling example of sense of place as well. I feel that Sue knows inherently that kids are the same no matter where they live, so place is not a factor in ability to successfully manage a classroom or differentiate instruction.

Community and Coaching

Shifting gears in the discussion led to questions about community involvement. Sue had accepted the head junior varsity volleyball coaching position at the beginning of the school year and feels that significantly contributed to her feelings of positive involvement in the community. "Well with coaching it was kind of being there in the community and you got to meet different members of the community that would come out to the games. I met a lot of the people. I don't know what would have happened had I not coached. I think it was a really good thing to coach. I think it really did help me get involved and as much as I was worried about it being too much and it was kind of a lot, but it was worth it to get your foot in the door. I think that it being at the beginning of the year, really did help me. I think it did make a difference in my involvement and the way people perceived me as, oh, she's willing to be involved, that kind of thing. Whereas when some people are new and they just like, no, no, you don't want to do anything, or you're just scared. You don't want to be too overbearing and insert yourself, but that level you want to be involved, but you don't want to push people's buttons because you are the new person. I think coaching really did help for me. I think that is one of the things that does help with smaller schools. They do have more coaching opportunities, like different activities. Even if it's not sports like coaching or student council or different things like that, you can involve yourself in to get to know a wide variety of people" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of belonging and place are found in this long piece of data. Coaching and sports are an integral part of rural culture in North Dakota and provide a sense of ownership in the school and community. Sue recognizes this and understands the importance of honoring the responsibility and position that coaching places her in the community.

Relationships and Personal Growth

Earlier conversation revealed how supported Sue felt by her colleagues and I inquired about the level of support Sue received from her administration. "I think the superintendent is wonderful. He has done nothing but help me, he's done everything I've ever asked him to do. He's supported me, like he said he would with coaching and with any parent concerns that came about during the season" (personal communication, May 2021). Relationships and sense of belonging are important to Sue and she feels validated in her superintendent's support. Sue has shown through this entire interview that when people value her for her skill set, she feels successful. She thrives in this type of support.

When the researcher asked her about her relationship with her principal, she was reluctant to share and looked away from the camera. She seemed apologetic in her storytelling: "so it's just been a year for admin and not that it's bad to have a rough year. It's the growing, like you can have your principal's kid and survive. You can have anyone's kid you know, as the years go forward. It's just like one of those things, she was the teacher of the grade I teach. I do have her kid. It's just that I put so much pressure on myself that sometimes I feel overwhelmed by her, if that makes sense" (personal communication, May 2021). I appreciated Sue's honesty in this story, knowing she had some level of trust with me to share her insecurities and apprehension about the situation with having her principal's son in her classroom. Sue's sense of self and belonging were challenged in this situation and she knew how she needed to accept and grow this year. She seemed self-reflective and able to acknowledge her contribution to feeling unsure of her ability. This data tells me she really wants to meet everyone's expectations of her, including her own, yet she came to realize that she may need to relax her personal expectations for her to feel successful.

In Sue's story of how her relationship with her principal has unfolded, she shared that she struggles with criticism and feels the need to have perfection in her performance. This story line led to Sue sharing that she felt like she had to academically catch her students up this year. "So, I think this class is has really taught me that it is all about the relationships. What they recall is so much more when they know that their teacher cares about them. In the past it was very much like if they had missing work, they stayed in from recess. If they had PE that day, they didn't get recess. Those kinds of things were very old school. I think that a lot of them didn't thrive in that environment. I mean, there were kids who obviously are going to thrive in any environment. They're the high achiever, you know the kind where they can succeed. The amount of growth that these kids have shown this year, really just like has confirmed my belief that the more you care about the kids, the more they're going to grow academically because that's just been proven throughout this year" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of belonging is so important to Sue and she has seen the advantage and growth in her students to support this. As a former classroom teacher, I would agree with Sue and have also seen the wonders a strong relationship can accomplish.

Mentoring and a Call to Return

As the interview was coming to a close, Sue did offer that she "thinks that it helped having a formal mentor. Yes, I know I liked the structured meeting times. I liked meeting with her every week, once a week to talk and to get out any concerns or problems or whatever. Some of the questions though, that they asked you, it was the same questions every week. How is it going? Well, what's going bad? Sometimes it was just hard to come up with what it is going good this week. It's been a rough week, or it's been a really awesome week. I don't have anything going on that I need to share. So, some of the questions were just kind of like I would have rather

just talk to her more instead of writing it and filling out paperwork about how it's going. I would have rather just talked about how it's going, instead of, you know, like let's write down how we're feeling and I'm more of a verbal. Like I just want to tell you what's going on, you know, that kind of thing. But it was nice to have someone there to answer all my questions and to help me through different situations and that kind of stuff" (personal communication, May 2021). Sense of self is evident her as Sue knows how she learns best and what supports she needs to be a successful teacher. Again, she is seeing in herself how crucial it is for her personal success to create strong, supportive relationships. I would recommend that she continue this relationship informally to increase her likelihood of continued success in her classroom.

The final question the researcher asked Sue was if she planned on returning to the small rural school for the upcoming academic year. Very sincerely, she answered "Well, I don't know what my whole life plan is, but I can tell you, I signed my contract for next year. I did sign the contract to teach and coach again next year. And we're going to go to grad school on top of it because you know, why not do that. So, it'll be an interesting year" (personal communication, May 2021). I smiled at her comments and wished her well. Sue is very sure in her sense of belonging and what that looks like. She also has a strong sense of self in understanding what she needs as a learner and teacher. Finally, her sense of place goes hand in hand with belonging and she did well explaining her thoughts on how relationships and knowing where her students' place creates opportunities for growth.

I thoroughly enjoyed my interview with Sue as she walked through what first year teaching in a global pandemic looked like. Her self-confidence and brutal honesty helped paint a picture of how a sense of belonging in a place can positively color an experience. Sue took on

more in her first year than a typical beginning teacher, and did so with self- reflection, a desire to create a classroom family, and the knowing that relationships would be the key to her success.

Coding Begins

Reading the personal communications and interpreting the themes completed the coding process. The personal communications were the unedited significant statements that I used as evidence of the three themes that emerged. Before reaching that level of analysis, coding of the significant statements occurred. Those codes were used to create categories, those categories were used to create the themes. Finally, the themes were linked back to the personal communications and used for the thematic analysis.

Categories

After reading the transcripts and discovering significant statements that may have specifically answered the questions I asked or noticed because of the tone that was used to tell the story, I began to look for categories that the significant statements may begin to fit. As the coding progressed, the following categories emerged from both interviews: achievement, expectations, experience, influence, place, and relationships. Discussion of how the categories were determined, evidence to support them, and the product of the two follows.

Achievement

Achievement, a result of something gained by hard work or effort, was chosen as a code in reference to items that related to grade point average and confidence in Joy's ability to teach the science content. This category appeared as an answer when asked about her teaching story and her teacher preparation course work when she stated that she "generally did well in her classes" (personal communication, May 2021). Achievement was not present in both interviews,

but important to recognize as it shed light on the perceived disparity between science coursework and teacher education coursework.

Expectations

Expectations was defined as assignments given to the participants by administrators, mentors, or professors. Expectations may have been positive in nature, i.e. being in charge of the after school program, teaching five science preps in a day, or knowing that every class has high kids and low kids, and occurred in teacher preparation or during the first year of teaching. Conversely, expectations may have been negative in connotation, i.e. low or ill-defined expectations from adjuncts and professors or inconsistencies in field experiences, while being present during their undergraduate experiences.

Experience

Experience was defined as life events that were present during teacher preparation or the first year of teaching. They may have been positive or negative in nature and somewhat similar between the two participants. Sue's major life experiences included running an after-school program during her undergraduate years, which provided the opportunity for her to decide that teaching was indeed the best career path for her. Additionally, her student teaching experience was very positive, as she "has transferred things over to her classroom this year" (personal communication, May 2021). Joy's experiences included her realizing that she did want to become a teacher after she had spent time as a volunteer at a science based educational center, getting the opportunity to teach in an early field experience, and participating in a three-day field experience in a suburban setting.

Influence

Influence, defined as the impact of others' opinions on the participants, was identified in both interviews. This category was particularly important as the research questions were generated to gather the participants' experiences in their teacher preparation and as beginning teachers. Influence was found to be positive in Sue's story when she shared how she came to be asked to run the after-school program and coach volleyball. She did experience some negative influence during her first year of teaching with the power struggle between her principal and herself. After sharing how her colleagues dealt with the influence of the principal, Sue did appear to be at peace with the situation. Joy experienced influence differently. She shared that the influence of her professors' experiences colored how she would teach science. Her influence seemed more neutral as there were no strong emotions tied to the stories.

Place

Place matters, or so I thought. The study was based on the conceptual framework that place matters and defines us. This narrative study did not find that to be true. Based on the two interviews, while both participants chose to teach in rural schools, it was not place that determined the choice. For both, place mattered in the sense that they would be commuting to work each day and would not be living in the community in which they taught. Place mattered more for the role convenience played in securing their first positions and not having to wait for an extended period of time to accept a job. Place mattered in that both knew what kind of prior knowledge and backgrounds their students would be brining to the table, but place was not defining them in what they brought to their classrooms.

Place was the second most common category among the two and could be argued that because of the nature of the storytelling questions the participants were led to talk about that. Place did not take on a negative connotation in the interviews. Both Joy and Sue were open to

teaching in rural schools, found being involved in their school communities to be positive, and liked that the atmosphere was welcoming. Joy stated "I don't know if I'd want to be teaching any school where I had a larger class size. So, I'm really happy with all those things about this school" (personal communication, May 2021). Sue shared "I can't guarantee that I'll always teach out there or that I will always teach in a rural community, but I do like it and I do like where I'm at right now" (personal, communication, May 2021). Place did play into their teaching life story, but not in the context the researcher had thought it might.

Relationships

Relationships as a category was defined by the researcher as any interaction between students, colleagues, administration, and community members. Of all the categories discovered in the narrative analysis, relationships were the most common between the two participants. The driving question of the study "what experiences contribute to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district?" can best be answered by the effect that relationships played in the participants' desire to return to their classrooms in the fall. Both spoke very highly of the support their colleagues offered to them this year. Sue shared that they would call or text when she was ill to check up on her, while Joy shared the respect she had for her colleague and mentor when he was a sounding board for her as she navigated new content and student attitudes. Joy and Sue appreciated their administrators' support and confidence in their abilities to teach. Joy was especially grateful when her principal gave her the freedom to create a new course for her students based on her desire to reach her students where they are academically. Sue felt confident when her administrator supported her in becoming a head coach and first-year teacher as she accepted the coaching assignment.

Relationships with their students were possibly the strongest factor for returning to the same school next fall. Both participants shared that their undergraduate professors stressed the importance of forming meaningful relationships with their students. Sue and Joy spoke about their experiences while student teaching and becoming attached to their students. Additionally, Joy spoke of meeting her students where they are and how much she enjoyed watching them light up and become engaged during the field trips she was allowed to plan for her students. Sue spoke about the masking mandates during COVID and how not seeing her students' full faces and they not seeing hers was difficult. Sue shared how she and her class appreciated the ability to finally be free of the masks and really mingle with each other in their classroom. Both Joy and Sue appeared to recognize the value in the positive relationships they had with their students.

Relationships with the community members did not play as important a role as those with colleagues, administrators, and students. Because neither Joy nor Sue lived in their school communities, they had limited exposure to the community members. Also, both communities were very small and had few commercial venues that either participant would need to frequent. Sue did share that coaching allowed her the opportunity to meet community members. She did speak positively about the relationship between coaching and the community members seeing that she was interested in being involved on a bigger level than just teaching.

Relationships with professors and mentors was discussed as being a positive influence; however, it did not have a significant impact on Joy and Sue's decisions to return. Although I interpreted those relationships as models that Joy and Sue wanted to replicate in their own classrooms.

Themes

Figure 3 below provides a visual on the three major themes that were uncovered during the interviews. These include sense of place, sense of self, and sense of belonging. Relationships were an integral component of each major theme, while expectations were present in sense of place and sense of self. These themes are explained in the following section.

Figure 3. Major Themes from Thematic Analysis (Schmidt, 2021)
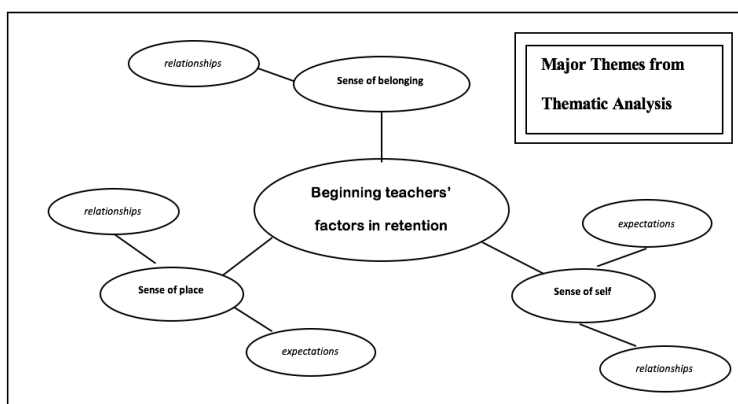
Narrative Analysis

What experiences contribute to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district? Three overarching themes emerged from the data: sense of self, sense of belonging, and sense of place. These three major themes will be discussed using the most common categories from the initial coding and the research questions.

Sense of Self

The categories of relationships and expectations came together to support the major theme of sense of self. Sense of self emerged from the data analysis as the participants had come to understand that they wanted to become teachers and experienced confidence from their mentors and administrators. They came to know themselves, their abilities, and limitations through the relationships and the expectations of their professors, colleagues, and administration.

The research question: what are the stories the beginning teachers share about their teacher education preparation programs? was answered through the data analysis. This question applies to the major theme of sense of self because the participants came to know they needed rigor in their studies. Both Joy and Sue felt their teacher education courses were not as rigorous as they could have been. They both spoke of their field experiences and student teaching in a mixed light. They enjoyed their student teaching and felt their cooperating teachers were very supportive and provided a wealth of strategies that they used this year. Sue shared that she wanted to be like her cooperating teacher. Their field experiences were varied and not as successful in their stories. Joy went to an urban area for three days and did not have as much time to observe as she would have liked. Sue only had one field experience and felt like it was not productive as it was one day a month for four months. Both ladies had extensive work experience with students outside of a formal school setting and felt that was as beneficial as their teacher preparation courses.

Through their participation in their school's mentoring program, each participants' sense of self came to be realized through their self-reflection and conversations with their mentors. Asking themselves weekly what went right and what did not also helped create relationships with their mentors. The expectations Joy and Sue placed on themselves to do right by their students came from a sense of self. Both spoke of meeting their students where they were and had a

feeling of a sense of personal accomplishment when their students did well or were engaged. I believe that positively impacted their decisions to return to their rural schools for the next year.

As Joy and Sue shared stories of their administrators, it was noted that they appreciated the support and validation of their practices. Joy was particularly vocal about how much she was grateful for the freedom to teach and meet her kids where they were. She valued her administrator's faith in her to create a new science course that would better suit her students. Sue also valued the confidence her administrator held in her to be both a teacher and head coach. Sue struggled more with her principal's need to compare Sue's teaching to her own when she was in the classroom. The sense of confidence each administrator had in Joy and Sue affected their sense of self as teachers.

Sense of Belonging

The category of relationships supports the theme of sense of belonging. Relationships heavily influenced the participants' sense of belonging in their school communities. According to the data, they experienced a building of relationships that ultimately led to their desire to return to their classrooms in the fall. Although the 2020-2021 academic year included a global pandemic that affected delivery of instruction, both teachers were confident in their ability to create lasting relationships with their students, colleagues, administrators, and, to a limited degree, community members.

In response to the specific research question how do beginning rural teachers experience belonging in their school? the participants shared the stories of building relationships with their students, colleagues, and administrators. Both participants shared the appreciation they felt for their mentors and agreed that they would like to continue the program informally in the next

year. The experience of talking weekly and having a sounding board were mentioned by both. Because the majority of the stories were positive in nature, it can be argued that the participants felt safe and confident in returning for another year.

Forming relationships with colleagues contributed to a feeling a sense of belonging in the form of checking in with Joy and Sue. Joy enjoyed the weekly meetings with her mentor and felt like she belonged to the school community as she was able to share stories with her mentor about her students. Sue felt that she belonged because her colleagues called to check up on her when she was absent. Overall, the experiences shared most fully supported the evidence that the relationships that were created and sustained over the school year led to the retention of both Joy and Sue. This narrative study detailed two beginning teachers' experiences of their first year. Each teacher stressed the importance of the relationships that were built in her first year. Each teacher is returning because of those relationships. Creating relationships within the community was not necessarily a driving force during Joy and Sue's first year, however, teaching in a rural community does lend itself to a smaller circle of people to know.

Sense of Place

The two themes of relationships and expectations were present in both interviews. These categories come together to create a sense of place. The sense of place was enhanced by the formation of relationships and expectations from the school community and rural town community. Experiencing place for the participants meant becoming part of a learning community as both a teacher and a student. Part of the sense of place the participants experienced was inferred as knowing that smaller class sizes would lead to closer relationships. It meant knowing the culture of their students and how to tie the geographic place into their teaching. Sense of place meant understanding and respecting the "Class A" versus "Class B"

mentality or culture. Place was important in the distances that students had to drive to attend sporting events or to get to school. Place was a factor for commuting to school and having that physical distance from their students and colleagues.

The research question asks: how do beginning rural teachers experience living and teaching in rural communities? Using the major theme of sense of place to answer this, the idea of place directly and positively affects retention in that both participants have signed contracts for the coming year. Geographic place was not a factor because commuting was not an issue. Sense of place in knowing the culture and how it affected their students was a positive factor. They understood the connectedness and background knowledge their students were brining into the classroom. Along with feeling connected to the place of school, through the ability to paint a classroom and have the freedom to take students into the larger community on field trips, Joy and Sue found positive affirmation that they were comfortable in their schools.

Summary

This chapter walked through the data analysis process that yielded the three major themes of sense of place, sense of self, and sense of belonging. The two interviews were summarized using the guiding questions and most noteworthy experiences. A thematic analysis detailing the description of the resulting codes was explained. A graphic at the beginning of the final analysis was used to show the relationship of the minor and major themes. A summary of the study, discussion of how the major themes and the conceptual framework intersect, and recommendations will be shared in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative study set out to understand the "average everydayness" (Guignon, 2012, p.101) of a beginning rural teacher's career and sense of preparedness for the position. Through interview questions that helped the participants tell their stories, the experiences of those beginning teachers led to understanding what factors contributed to their success. This chapter will summarize the themes of sense of self, belonging, and place as they intersect with critical pedagogy and place based learning. The literature will be linked to the themes that emerged. Finally, recommendations for teacher educators and school administrators will be shared.

What experiences contribute to a successful beginning teaching career in a rural school district? Beginning teachers' experiences are affected by a myriad of stories and these experiences affect how successful these teachers are. We want them to know their place in their school community and how we value their contribution to helping raise the community's children. While the overarching question of this study was to determine the factors that led to success for beginning teachers, retention is an observable manifestation of that success. In the end, successful beginning teachers are more likely to renew their contracts for the coming school year and teacher educators and school administrators have an important role in that story.

That important role of assisting beginning teachers develop their sense of identity as teachers can take many forms. Whether by small, seemingly insignificant gestures or by purposefully planned learning opportunities, we can grow teachers who will grow our children. We want successful teachers to come back to their classrooms. Teacher retention has been studied by many. A recent study by Miller, Young, Perrone and Grogan (2020) addressed the importance of teacher preparation programs, school administration, and human resources

focusing on professional fit by providing beginning teachers "a clear sense of the mission, instructional expectations, and school climate in a given school" (p. 414). Understanding that beginning teachers' beliefs and identity changes over time is addressed in a study by Lavigne (2014) that states administrative support, supportive relationships with colleagues, and freedom to teach are positive indicators of retention. Borman and Dowling (2008) reiterate the importance of developing professional relationships for beginning teachers to increase retention.

Discussion: Sense of Self, Belonging, and Place

As the themes of sense of self, belonging, and place emerged from the participants stories, it is important to understand how these can be addressed in beginning teachers' teacher preparation courses and in their first teaching assignments. Knoblauch and Chase (2015) state that setting, rural, suburban, or urban, is a "vital context variable" as preservice teachers begin developing their sense of self (p. 105). Eppley's (2015) study also reiterates the impact place has on developing teacher identity based on the importance of "developing social and cultural familiarity with rural people and places" (p. 69). Knowing that the themes are supported by the literature lays the foundation for additional or expanded research in the future.

Sense of Self

Knowing one's self matters. In this study the participants both recognized their strengths and limitations as they progressed from high school students to beginning teachers. From Joy coming to know later in her undergraduate coursework that she really did want to be a teacher to Sue knowing very early on in high school that teaching was her calling, both felt called to education. As they progressed through their respective teacher education preparation programs, they both came to know through their own instructors' expectations what they wanted in their own classrooms. Their experiences aided their ability to choose this beginning teacher

experience and feel success. Both participants chose a rural school because they knew they needed to feel a personal connection to the school community.

Joy chose based on her connection in the interview. She knew she needed a challenge and prepping for six different science classes each day would provide her with that. She had shared in her story that she felt her teacher preparation courses were not as rigorous as she had hoped. She also knew from her own experience that she learned best in smaller environments and felt she may teach more successfully in one as well.

Sue chose based on her connection in the interview as well. She knew she needed that personal connection and felt the small details of being face-to-face for the interview. She felt being encouraged to make the space personal would make the rural school a good fit for her. She also was validated in her sense of self when the superintendent asked her to take the coaching position as well. Through her story, I could tell she was proud to be handpicked for this coaching assignment. She knew she had the ability to do well with assuming a significant amount of responsibility during her first year.

Both participants' sense of self was evident as they were able to take what they knew about themselves as students, needing to feel connected and challenged, and put into practice in their own classrooms as they met their students where they were academically. Joy had hoped there would be more parental support while Sue did have a more positive experience with parents, especially as a coach. Although parental support was not always shown in ways they thought, connecting with parents in the classroom and on the court helped develop that shared sense of responsibility for the students' learning (Eppley, 2015; Peterson et al., 2018).

As Joy and Sue come to know themselves as beginning teachers, they have told stories about personal expectations related to rigor of studies, knowing they need to feel connected, and knowing that education is where they wanted to land. This quote says it best: "connections among people are not based on contracts but communities" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 4 as cited in Barter, 2008). Joy and Sue have a strong sense of self that allows them to know they are in teaching for the connections with their students, colleagues, and communities.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging matters. In this study, it was found that both participants are returning to their schools because of the positive relationships they have with their colleagues and administration; a large body of research identifies positive relationships as a significant factor in retention of beginning teachers. The school interview process for both participants was positive and included opportunities for them to experience how the school might be a good fit for them. A story of support for the added responsibilities of coaching factored into Sue's desire to return both to the classroom and coaching for the coming year. Joy's freedom to teach and create meaningful classes for her students factored into her decision to return. Feeling valued and supported is a weighty ingredient in feeling successful and was proven by this study.

While both participants have signed their contracts for another year, neither one felt this was the last position they take in their teaching career. Relationships factored into the retention but may not have the staying power that is necessary for longevity at those schools. Attending a small college and feeling safe in that environment may have contributed to the choice of taking a first position in a rural school. Another factor to consider is the availability of openings for the 2020-2021 school year. Perhaps both participants chose their positions and signed their contracts for year two because they just wanted a job and did not want the hassle of trying to apply for

another position. Maybe the thought of moving classrooms and making new teacher friends was not in their life plans at this time. Knowing that relationships factored into their feelings of sense of belonging and reinforced their desire to return to the school community where they felt they belonged, it would be wise to continue providing training in that area at both the teacher preparation level and at the professional level.

Gholam (2018) posits that "Beginning teachers need effective teacher mentoring programs to assist them in exploring, reflecting upon, and developing in their career" (p. 2). Rural schools must appropriate resources for teacher mentor programs as it has proven an effective strategy to increase retention among beginning teachers (Marker et al., 2013). Sowell (2017) writes, "Many educational institutions now recognize the value of providing novice teachers with an induction program to support their growth as professionals within the first years of teaching thus alleviating some frustrations, improving instructional methods, and encouraging new teachers to stay in the profession" (p. 133).

The associations between the current literature on mentoring programs and the participants experiences are very similar recognizing the positive impact mentoring has on feeling a sense of belonging in the school community. Both Joy and Sue shared they valued the formal mentoring programs that were made available to them. Joy and Sue shared instances where they appreciated the weekly meetings and ability to voice their concerns and seek assistance with troubled students or voice their concerns and lack of confidence in delivering the content. The participants shared equally the satisfaction of the relationships that were created and maintained over the school year with their mentors.

Sue's mentor was a veteran elementary teacher who met weekly with her using the formal North Dakota Teacher Support System Mentoring Program (NDTSS), which had a

variety of time commitments. Sue appreciated the dedicated time, however voiced concern about the redundancy of the questions and the required paperwork. She would have preferred to be more informal in her mentoring. Sue shared she would be open to participating again in a much less formal setting.

Joy's mentor was a five-year veteran and taught different content than Joy. She appreciated his frankness and ability to share history about their students. Also, she welcomed the weekly meetings and opportunity to share content and behavioral strategies. Like Sue, Joy also participated in the NDTSS program and would be open to a second year of formal mentoring.

Although it was not stated directly, it was inferred that the mentor relationship factored into both participants sense of belonging and ultimately their retention. In reference to a study conducted by ND ESPB for the 2019-2020 school year, participation in the NDTSS was an indicator of retention over a five year span. Joy and Sue would not have been part of that data set, but because the stories about the mentor relationship were shared freely by both, it can be assumed that having the dedicated support of a colleague factored into their positive first year experience.

A sense of belonging is critical in a school and classroom. That randomly assigned group of people become a family of sorts over time and develop a connection that contributes to the success of its members. History, places, people, and experiences all contribute to a sense of belonging and must be acknowledged. McLaren (1990) argues that critical pedagogy must also be the pedagogy of place and address the problem, experiences, and histories that make up students' lives. As those items are addressed, the identity of the community begins to be formed.

In rural communities, the intimate and mundane details of peoples' lives can become a currency that is doled out as belonging is gained. Being allowed to know the intimate details of peoples' economic and community status can be a double edged sword. Looking through the conceptual framework lens, Gruenewald (2008) states the importance of the critical pedagogy of place examines the political and economic realities of a community. In rural communities, the school is typically a major employer and the parents of the students who attend are usually aware of the towns' economic status. Combining the economic reality and problems of the community can be a heavy weight for a new teacher to bear, nevertheless, they become a measure of belonging in a community. Joy and Sue knew the backgrounds of their students and understood the importance of designing lessons and courses that reflected their knowledge of those intimate details of their students' lives and membership in the community.

The notion that members of rural communities can be considered second class citizens can also be off putting for beginning teachers who are not from rural areas. In North Dakota, the "Class A", urban, versus "Class B", rural, mentality comes into play in community identification. Outsiders may be made to feel that they do not belong in "Class B" communities, therefore beginning teachers may be reluctant to apply for those positions if they are not from the area. However, this study proved that the participants were welcomed in and they felt they belonged in their school communities.

Gruenewald (2008) speaks to oppression in education and ways to challenge that. Oppression could be interpreted in rural areas as geographic isolation. Rural communities are often far from each other and make it necessary to travel great distances to meet up with others. The geographic isolation can be difficult for beginning teachers in rural schools as there are not same grade level or same content neighbors in the school. Beginning teachers come into their

first rural position having previously been mentored by professors, field placement teachers, and cooperating teachers in larger, more suburban schools. They were raised in the culture of community and have people in their corner. This study found that a sense of belonging was nurtured through the formal mentoring programs and helped combat geographic isolation and provided much needed support for the beginning teachers to feel successful.

Sense of Place

Place matters. This study found understanding place can lead to a successful beginning year of teaching. While I thought that the geographic component of place would matter, it was really the culture of place that mattered. Knowing where their students are from aids in knowing where they should go as a class. Situating learning in rural culture contributes to the connections needed for students to be successful learners. Joy and Sue needed this training to come from their teacher preparation programs.

Critical pedagogy and place-based learning can become a lens to use when considering beginning teachers' experiences. Critical pedagogy in the rural classroom was demonstrated when Joy and Sue consciously use their students' knowledge of their rural community to situate a lesson: drawing upon their students' knowledge of farms and farming communities and creating lessons that reflect how that community can benefit or change from what they are studying. Critical pedagogy was also shown when both participants made clear they are thoughtful of how they use their spaces for play, work, gathering as community, and taking into consideration the rural culture in which they live. Joy's desire to create a class that better meets her students' needs in science comes from a place of critical pedagogy. She is choosing to represent their needs and situate their learning in a context that has a more practical application.

Place-based learning is also evident in Joy's teaching as she has taken her class on field trips to an environmental science center to situate their science leaning in a real-world context.

Rural teachers must be taught to challenge the status quo thinking and be willing to teach to their students. Critical pedagogy for rural schools would honor rural teachers speaking to the culture of their communities and using curriculum that teaches a more democratic view of society (McLaren, 1990). Critical pedagogy also speaks to understanding their place in the leadership of the school community (McLaren, 1990). Instructing preservice teachers on the importance of service leadership, how to navigate school-community partnerships, and the importance of always searching for ways to make the community better are important pieces of the teacher preparation piece (Gruenewald, 2008).

Other studies have investigated the notion that "learning is placed practice and asks questions about priorities for placed teacher preparation for rural places" (Eppley, 2015, p. 70). Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) argue for connecting of the needs in the classroom, rural community, and practice in the field. Barta (2008) shares findings referencing the idea that much of the research addressing problems in rural school pinpoints the culture of ruralness rather than the actual problems associated with teacher preparation for these settings. Azano (2011) echoes the sentiment supporting teacher preparation involving rural specific practices.

An anticipated outcome of the study was the location of the field experience would matter to how successful the participants felt in their own classrooms. It was felt that if each participant had a specific field experience in a rural setting, they would feel more confident and successful. In reality, neither participant felt the setting affected the field experience. As they shared their stories, neither participant distinguished any differences from urban or rural

placements. Overall, they felt the strategies and lessons learned in their teacher preparation courses would be applicable to any setting.

One component of teacher preparation involves spending time in the field implementing theory in practice. The types and amount of early field experience Joy and Sue participated in were varied. Sue had a more traditional early field experience requiring an observation experience for her entry level Teacher Education courses while Joy was able to begin teaching immediately in her first field experience. Joy felt this was a positive, confidence building experience. Each participant did spend time observing in culturally diverse classrooms, however, Joy shared a story of her experience while Sue just stated that she had done some time in a diverse elementary setting. Joy's experience was felt by to be significant as it occurred in an out-of-state urban community. Joy's class spent three days observing three different schools and had time to interact with the teachers. It is inferred that this was a valuable first experience as she talked about the students and technology that they saw in action. It was memorable for her. Joy had no rural placement, but that did not deter her from applying for and accepting her first teaching position in a rural school.

Field experiences for the participants' methods coursework was vastly different. Joy filled 40 hours in a suburban science classroom, arranging her own schedule spread out over a month and a half. She spoke of building relationships with those students and mentor teacher and having multiple opportunities to observe and teach. Sue spoke negatively of her field experience. While most of her classmates were required to attend two field experiences, because of a scheduling snafu, Sue had only one. She went into a rural elementary classroom one day a month for four months. She was able to do some teaching but was not able to create meaningful relationships with her students or mentor teacher. She was visibly frustrated as she spoke about

this. Being placed in the rural setting for the field experience actually led to a negative perspective for Sue. In the end, neither participant experienced any specific place-based teacher preparation.

Experiencing sense of place for each participant was unique, however, as both understood the importance of recognizing and valuing where they were, either geographically or culturally. The participants' success in their geographic place, in part, can be attributed their understanding that culture and community define its members. Joy and Sue could be considered residents of their school community as they both made strong connections with their students, colleagues, and administrators. They are beginning their investment in the community as they have agreed to return to teach for another year. Joy and Sue had made that investment into the rural culture of their school and community and have become placed (Bushnell, 1999; Eppley, 2015). This study found that sense of place is the fuel to developing a sense of belonging.

Recommendations

How do teachers in a rural school setting experience their beginning years? With limited participants, this study has only scratched the surface of this question. Harfitt (2015) writes, "Teachers' knowledge is deeply intertwined with identity, or their 'stories to live by'" (p. 24). Through narrative inquiry, the participants have shown that relationships and mentoring played a role in creating their lived stories. It is difficult to disregard teacher satisfaction due to stress experienced in the first years of teaching, however when beginning teachers experience professional support from administration and have developed a membership in their professional communities, this can lead to retention (Harfitt, 2015). As an effort to mitigate the likelihood of beginning teachers leaving the field, Darling-Hammond states the importance of "preparing teachers to be collaborators, those who know how to bring all the complex bases together"

(Martin et al., 2017, p. 76). Creating supportive relationships, implementing mentoring programs, and investigating how preparing beginning teachers with a stronger skill set in collaboration are possible recommendations that are found from this study. Taking teacher preparation one step further by increasing the length and settings of field experiences may all prove to effective strategies in beginning teacher retention (Martin et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019). In the end, we want our beginning teachers to have a sense of self, strengths and limitations, feel a sense of belonging in their classrooms and school communities, and use their sense of place to know where they and their students come from and where they are going.

Teacher Educators and School Administrators: Create Relationships

Creating supportive relationships is the first recommendation of this study. Teacher educators and school administrators have the responsibility to prevent our beginning teachers from being left on an island to fend for themselves. Teacher educators must continue to implement or enhance how they foster creating and cultivating supportive relationships in their programs. School administrators must recognize beginning teachers need professional development and additional support to become proficient at this skill.

Teacher educators need to address the transition from field experience teacher to student teacher to beginning teacher and provide specific strategies or opportunities in beginning to form or develop lasting relationships with a mentor, cooperating teachers, and students. Because field experience teachers and student teachers enter those classrooms as guests, they do not have the same sense of belonging as a beginning teacher does in one's own classroom or school

community. Teacher educators need to be the liaison and explicitly model for the preservice teachers how to nurture those important relationships.

School administrators contribute to the beginning teachers' ability to create solid relationships by explicitly modeling this process. Creating relationships in this arena follows hand in hand with providing quality mentoring programs or opportunities for the beginning teachers. Clear communication can begin with the administrator and teacher relationship and assist in the development of other relationships in the school community (Sezgin et al., 2016). This study did highlight the significant positive impact the participants felt from their administrators' support and validation. Much like our students, beginning teachers want to feel valued and accepted.

There is a plethora of resources online, in blogs, teacher resource pages, and on social media that offer strategies for developing relationships in one's classroom with one's students. Games, routines, and recommendations for children's literature to share in the classroom are shared on these platforms and used by classroom teachers to develop a classroom community. Beginning teachers may be overwhelmed by the amount of resources and time it takes to implement some of these ideas, so they may rely on field experience and student teaching experiences as they implement this in their classrooms. Developing a positive relationship with their students may take more time than it did previously as there is not the support to guide the process. We know in education that it is not how much you teach but how much you care about those whom you teach that yields success in the classroom.

School Administrators: Formal Mentoring Programs

Ensuring that all beginning teachers have access to a formal mentoring program is a recommendation based on this study. School administrators are aware of the programs that are provided by the North Dakota Educational Standards and Practices Board, and they must be willing to require participation from their beginning teachers. In a study by Hobson et al. (2009), mentoring has been shown to have multiple benefits including: beginning teachers' ability to adapt to the norms and culture of their school and assisting with beginning teachers' ability to effectively manage their classrooms and own mental health. Mentoring programs also benefit the mentor, which can be beneficial for the school culture and positively enhance the mentor teacher's professional development (Hobson et al., 2009). Speaking to the benefits gained by the mentor, Ingersoll and Smith (2004) charge those agreeing to become mentors to undergo formal training. The level of support and guidance that needs to be provided to beginning teachers should not be taken lightly and does affect retention (Ingersoll et al., 2004).

This study looked specifically at beginning teachers experiences in rural schools in North Dakota. North Dakota does have a state sponsored teacher mentoring program that is run through the North Dakota Educational Standards and Practices Board (NDESPB). NDESPB has a study showing the positive effect this program has had on retention in the last five years at the state level (Jacobson et al., 2020). Extensive training is provided for the mentors and beginning teachers. The program is rigorous and requires weekly meetings, observation, and self-reflection. Mentors are provided monetary compensation and training. Administrators are also required to attend training and participate occasionally in the mentor sessions (NDESPB, n.d.). While the program is voluntary, it is recommended that beginning teachers inquire during the initial interview about the opportunity to participate in this program.

Both participants spoke highly of their participation in the program and were open to continuing if it was made available to them. School administrators have the responsibility to require their beginning teachers to participate. This reinforces to the beginning teacher they are valued in the school community and provides them with a jump start to create lasting relationships with their colleagues.

Teacher Educators: Teacher Preparation Changes

Challenging the way teacher educators think about teacher preparation is the final recommendation of this study. Teacher preparation programs vary across the state in the amount of field experience and length of student teaching and where preservice teachers are placed for those experiences. Roughly 60% of the 53 schools in North Dakota have fewer than 1,000 students, making them rural as defined by this study. Understanding that teacher educators are preparing preservice teachers for suburban field experiences and student teaching assignments while their first teaching experiences may be in rural settings is something to keep in mind. The disconnect between a suburban and rural experience may negatively affect retention if the beginning teachers feel they are lacking the skill set to be effective in their classrooms (Zeichner, 2010).

A conscious effort must be made in teacher preparation courses and field experiences to expose preservice teachers to a variety of settings. If it is not a requirement currently, field experiences should be required in both the urban and rural settings. While this may cost more in time and resources, we are doing a disservice to our beginning teachers if we limit their exposure applying theory to practice in the field. We spend time in our methods teaching how to differentiate based on content, process, and product. We need to spend an equal amount of time instructing how to teach *placed*, geographically and culturally. If one of our beginning teachers

takes a position in a rural community many miles from another school and is the only fourth grade teacher, we want them to feel as prepared and confident in finding resources, delivering, content, and being able to speak professionally as a beginning fourth grade teacher in an urban district who is one of four grade level teachers in the building.

Burnham (1908) looked more than one hundred years ago at this very idea that place may affect training and success of beginning teachers. Fast forward one hundred years and we continue to ask how we can improve our teacher preparation programs to ensure success of both beginning teachers and their students. Azano et al. (2016) write, "Now as teacher educators, we understand how crucial it is that preservice teachers understand the nuances of place and culture" (p. 110). Our call is to honestly look at our teacher preparation programs and examine where we can be better.

Sense of self, belonging, and place all contribute to success in a beginning teacher's story. Although this study failed to identify place as a deciding factor in feeling success, it did shed light on the importance that relationships and mentoring continue to play keeping teachers in their classrooms. Gruenewald (2012) tells us place "teaches us who, what and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives" (p. 636). Moving forward, several authors (Azano et al., 2016; Eppley, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2019; Reagan et al., 2019) state that additional research is needed about teacher preparation and support in rural schools. My hope is that continued studies be done to investigate how place and preparation may benefit teacher preparation programs.

Gathering stories from more beginning teachers in rural schools can shed light on how well teacher educators and school administrators are working to cultivate creating relationships, providing mentoring programs, and preparing beginning teachers to be successful in their classrooms and school communities.

Conclusion

My knowledge of my students, community, and how intertwined those are, along with living and teaching in a rural community for more than 15 years became the driving force of this study to better prepare beginning teachers for rural schools. Teaching in the K-12 system for 2o plus years in various locales and then transitioning to teacher education put into perspective the challenge of preparing teachers for more rural settings. This study began with the hypothesis that if beginning teachers are specifically trained to teach in rural schools, they will feel successful and stay. If they are specifically trained to teach in rural schools, they will make stronger connections based on their ability to connect to the rural culture and feel more successful in their teaching ability. Finally, if teacher education preparation programs begin to address the rural community and culture specifically, beginning teachers will feel more confident in choosing those schools for their first positions.

In reality, this small narrative study proved that relationships are what really matter in felling successful as a teacher. Feeling connected to one's students, colleagues, and administrators is what convinces the beginning teacher to return. One could argue from the results of this study, it really does take a village to raise a teacher.

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Appendix 1

Interview questions for the Research Study

Teaching on the prairie: Lived experiences from teacher education to retaining elementary

classroom teachers in rural mid-western schools

1. Tell me how your teaching life story unfolded. The best way to do this is to start with
    when you first knew you wanted to be a teacher, and then recount all the stories and
    things that have led to where you are. I am interested in everything that is important to
    you, there is no need to rush. I am interested in the details that led to your decision to
    become a teacher.

2. Tell me the story of your first year(s) teaching in this school district. Again, the best way to do this is to start with when you first thought of applying for your first teaching position, and then recounting all the stories and details that led you to where you are. I am interested in all the details that led to your decision to become a teacher in this school district.

3. Clarifying questions as needed:

    - Can you describe the most important lesson you have learned during your time teaching?

    - How would you describe you time in the community?

    - Can you tell me about your best and/or worst experience during your teacher preparation?

    - Can you tell me about your best and/or worst experience in this school year?

    - Do you think you will continue to teach at this school? What reasons support your decision?

    - Other questions may be asked as the interview progresses

The following questions may need to be asked if the subjects are not addressed in the story telling:

4. Please share your current teaching assignment – including how long you have been at this school, grade assignment, any extracurricular or committee assignments

5. Please share where you received your bachelor's degree – did you attend any other colleges before this one

6. Tell me about your undergraduate teacher education program preparation

    - Methods blocks or individual courses

- Time spent in practicum and student teaching – urban, suburban, rural placements, you requested or were just placed

- Methods, strategies, assessments for urban teaching assignments

- Methods, strategies, assessments for suburban teaching assignments

- Methods, strategies, assessments for rural teaching assignments

- Methods, strategies for community involvement

- Methods, strategies for mentoring

- Setting you feel most and least prepared to teach

7. Tell me about your current teaching assignment

- Class demographics

- Subjects you teach

- Do you have an assigned mentor?

- How prepared you feel you are to teach all the subjects and students

- How supported you feel by colleagues, administration, parents of students, community members

- Do you live in the community?

- Do you attend community events or use the goods and services in the community?