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Leveraging the Perspectives of Rural Educators to Develop Realistic Job Previews for Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention

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Research Article

Leveraging the Perspectives of Rural Educators to Develop Realistic Job Previews for Rural Teacher Recruitment and Retention

**Henry Tran
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Rose Ylimaki**

Rurality is perceived by many to be a deficit or challenge when it comes to teacher recruitment and retention. However, recently, some have argued that moving away from a deficit model and treating rurality as an asset may hold promise for teacher staffing. Drawing on Person-Organization (P-O) fit theory, we extend this argument in our study by investigating the perceptions of teachers from the rural Lowcountry of South Carolina, a region with documented severe teacher shortages, concerning rural teaching advantages and challenges. These reflections provide the data necessary to develop realistic job previews (RJP) that can be highlighted in the teacher staffing process at their schools. To obtain the data, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 11 rural teachers and one principal (n=12). Several common themes emerged, which we used to develop a sample web-based RJP content for demonstration purposes.

While teacher-staffing dilemmas plague many impoverished rural and urban communities, teacher-staffing research has primarily focused on recruitment and retention in urban teacher markets (Cuervo, 2016; Lankford et al., 2002), often to the exclusion of the same issues in rural contexts (Arnold et al., 2005; Corbett & White, 2014). However, rural schools often struggle with major staffing problems (Taie & Goldring, 2017) with some schools reporting few to non-existent candidates in their selection pools (Aragon, 2016; Hammer et al., 2005; Jimerson, 2003). In fact, the “rural school problem” is heavily predicated on the issue of rural teacher recruitment and retention (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Miller, 2008a). In response to the U.S. Department of Education’s report on rural education, University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) has called for the need to stabilize the rural educator workforce (UCEA, 2018).

Beyond rurality, teacher shortages are, on average, more severe in the southern states than in other regions of the United States (Sutcher et al., 2016). South Carolina is one such predominantly rural southern state that suffers from severe teacher shortages and is the focal state for our study. At the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, there were 550 teaching vacancies throughout the state, which was a 16% increase from the previous year (CERRA, 2019). The pattern that dates back to a number of

years prior, suggests that the vast majority of the vacancies “are usually correlated and can be more severe in the rural, disadvantaged parts of the state” (CERRA, 2017, p. 4).

The teacher supply is inequitably distributed, with poor rural schools often facing extreme difficulty with hiring and retaining qualified teachers (Maranto & Shuls, 2012; Barley, 2009). Player (2015) analyzed School and Staffing Survey (SASS) data spanning 15 years and found that rural schools are 60% more likely to report difficulty hiring English Language Learner (ELL) teachers than their urban counterparts and have more STEM vacancies than urban or suburban schools. Schools that are not able to generate enough recruitment interest may have to “hire whoever walks through the door, or [fail] to offer some courses” (Maranto & Shuls, 2012, p. 1).

Yet rural teaching is associated with many positive attributes that are often not advertised, such as working with smaller class sizes or having a closer relationship with students and deeper connections with the community overall (Hammer et al., 2005; Player, 2015). Rurality is not only underutilized as an asset in various stages of the teaching career from teacher preparation programs to teacher recruitment (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018), but the fact that rural communities are often described from a deficit perspective reinforces this. For example, some rural

districts offer a form of “hazard pay” that provides rural teachers higher financial premiums (e.g., signing bonuses or higher salaries) to “offset” the “negative” working conditions in rural schools (Cuervo, 2014). The key to recruitment and retention of a sustainable rural teacher workforce is to find individuals who are compatible with the hiring rural school’s environment. This requires not only highlighting the rural advantages, but engaging honestly with the challenges, balancing both for a credible realistic job preview (RJP).

This paper a) reports on findings from a study designed to investigate the perceptions of teachers who teach in the rural Lowcountry, a region with documented severe teacher shortages in South Carolina, concerning rural teaching advantages *and* challenges, and b) draws on these findings to develop a realistic job previews (RJP) that can be highlighted in the teacher staffing process at their schools. We start by reviewing the literature on rurality and its advantages and challenges for teacher recruitment and retention, as well as our theoretical framework on person-organizational fit. We then describe the methods of the study, findings, include a sample web based RJP content for demonstration purposes and conclude with a discussion on implications.

Literature Review

Rurality is often researched solely from a deficit perspective (Anttila & Vaananen, 2013; Sherwood, 2001), however we chose to deviate from this trend by incorporating an asset model to highlight the rural advantages. In the sections below, we review the literature concerning the advantages and challenges of rural teaching and introduce RJP.

Advantages of Rural Teaching

The advantages of teaching in rural communities are often not advertised or acknowledged. For example, the cost of living is often lower in rural spaces (Rudzitis, 1999), with smaller schools that allow for closer relationships with students and the provision of individualized learning plans/attention for them (Player, 2015). Factors correlated with the rural contexts such as the intimacy of the rural lifestyle and small class sizes have been found to be associated with rural teacher recruitment and retention (Ulferts, 2016). More outdoor resources and stronger community relationships strengthen cohesion between students, parents and school community (McGranahan et al., 2010). In addition,

the perception of satisfaction is generally stronger at rural than non-rural schools (Player, 2015), as they offer less inflexibility, bureaucracy, classroom disruptions and disciplinary problems (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995). Moreover, their teachers typically have more influence and autonomy in the classroom instruction including use of textbooks, standards, curriculum and pedagogical technique than urban and suburban teachers (Player, 2015; Cuervo, 2014). Other positive factors associated with teaching in the rural communities identified by Boylan and McSwan (1998) include prestigious status of teaching in the community, friendly communication among the community members, strong teacher engagement in community, natural environment, as well as lower cost of living and less crime than urban areas.

Shuls and Maranto (2014) argue that the traditional teacher recruitment approach takes a classical scientific management and Weberian bureaucratic perspective, by pushing for strictly standardized materialistic incentives such as financial motivation that are grounded in a self-interest model. With this perspective, the individual motivation of teachers is discounted and all teachers are treated as uniformly motivated by economic interest (e.g., hazard pay to work in rural schools). However, there is evidence to support that the emphasis of student-centered appeals can improve rural teacher recruitment efforts (Hess, 2010). Idealistic (e.g., student-centered or public service) appeals are important and may have more potential to be effective recruitment messages for difficult to staff jobs such as rural teaching in impoverished communities, partly because altruism (as opposed to material incentives such as salaries) is often the motivating factor for individuals to enter the teaching profession in the first place (Shuls & Maranto, 2014). Examples of these appeals include the ability to make a difference in the lives of impoverished marginalized students. Within the rural context, these opportunities are quite prevalent. Therefore, because teaching always occurs within a unique social and cultural space (Eppley, 2015), attempts to ignore the spatial dimension results in the missed opportunity to leverage the full capacity of rural teacher recruitment efforts.

Maranto and Shuls (2012) analyzed 53 rural school district websites in Arkansas and found that most of their teacher recruitment pages did not advertise non-materialistic incentives such as professional growth or ability to develop close relationships with students. The only district that did

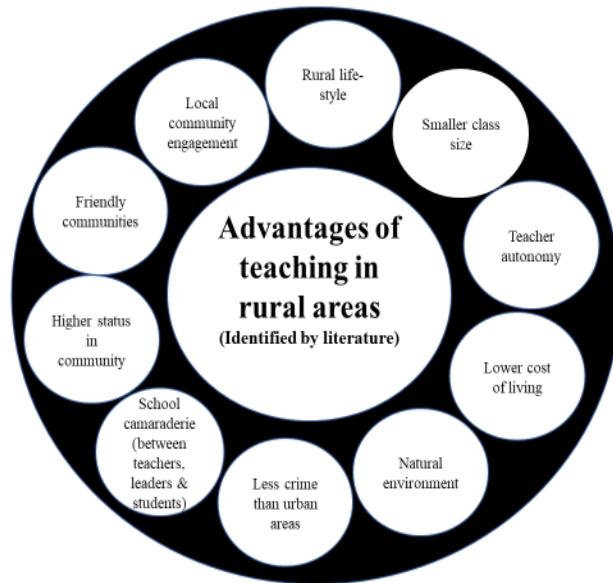


Figure 1. Advantages of teaching in rural areas (identified by literature)

was Delta, a charter school, whose teacher recruitment page prominently communicated the opportunity that their teachers gain to make a difference in their students' lives. Perhaps uncoincidentally, this district also experienced the most success (i.e., approximately 14 applicants for each vacancy whereas other districts with similar student demographics and close geographical proximity struggled with only a couple of applicants) with generating teacher recruitment interests for their vacancies.

Likewise, Hammer et al., (2005) reviewed the literature on effective rural teacher staffing strategies and identified it is critical that it is "rooted in the community" (p. 12). In addition, the almost 600 superintendents that the authors surveyed about their districts' rural teacher staffing practices suggested that advertising the advantages of rural teaching and living is more practical than economic incentives such as signing bonuses and salary increases, especially because financial incentives are limited and unsustainable. Stated advantages by educators included a stronger connection to the rural environment, opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of impoverished students, more control over school decisions, and empowerment for experimentation.

Figure 1 summarizes some of the key advantages identified in the literature that can be potentially employed to address rural teacher staffing issues.

Challenges of Rural Teaching

According to a report from Phi Delta Kappa entitled *Teaching: Respect with Dwindling Appeal* (Phi Delta Kappa, 2018), the majority of parents in the United States do not desire their children to pursue a career in education, and the children themselves do not want to become educators as the pay is not equivalent to those with similar degrees, the profession does not garnish respect, and the work demands are high. Tran and Smith's (2019) findings from their study of college students' consideration for rural teacher employment echo these sentiments. Indeed, much has been discussed concerning the challenges of rural teaching that result in recruitment and retention difficulties, such as employment in less desirable geographic contexts associated with fewer amenities/recreational opportunities like beaches and shopping destinations (Miller, 2008b), lower pay often as a result of a lower tax base (Tran, 2018; Hammer et al., 2005), less professional development opportunities and pedagogical resources (Player, 2015; Hammer et al., 2005), less specialty courses (Monk, 2007) and weaker or non-existent separation for personal vs. professional life relative to their suburban and rural counterparts (Miller, 2012). Moreover, many rural schools are found in high poverty communities that create additional barriers for teacher employment (Monk, 2007; Roscigno & Crowley, 2001) as they often have fewer resources

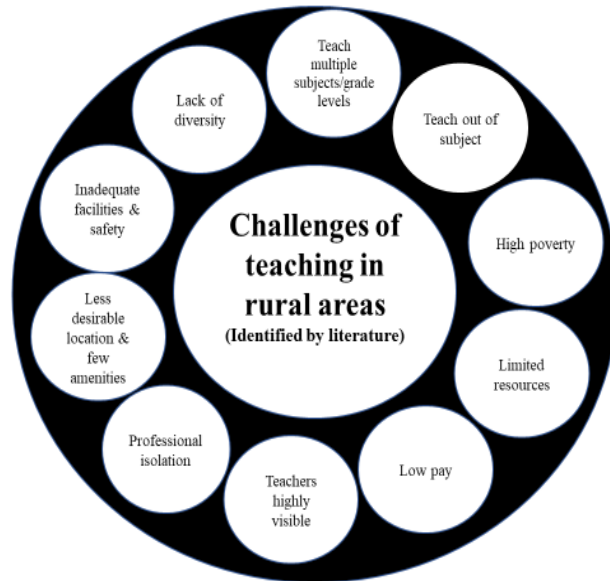


Figure 2. Challenges of teaching in rural areas (Identified by literature)

e.g., technology (Howley et al., 2011), as well as unsafe and inadequate facilities (Tran, 2018).

In addition, rural teachers often teach more out-of-subject courses, serving as both subject generalist and specialist (Biddle & Azano, 2016), given the smaller enrollment and less teacher staffing, which results in an increased need for teacher preparation time (Hammer et al., 2005). They usually have to be responsible for much more than instruction (Berry & Gravelle, 2013), yet often face severe social, physical, professional and psychological isolation (Anttila & Vaananen, 2013). Figure 2 summarizes the key challenges associated with rural teaching identified in the literature. To properly account for both the advantages and the challenges, one increasingly employed human resource strategy is the provision of realistic job previews (RJPs) during the recruitment process.

Realistic Job Previews

RJPs have been widely used to recruit employees outside of the education sector (Liu et al., 2015). They can provide more accurate information for applicants to make better employment decisions that will likely result in a better employment fit (Liu & Johnson, 2006; Seldom & Orenstein, 2011), increasing its potential short-term and long-term attractiveness for both recruitment and retention. Research has shown that RJPs bolster an employer's candidate pool by appealing to the intrinsic and

extrinsic motivating factors most relevant to job seekers, using credibility enhancing measures like employee testimonials and other word of mouth strategies (Gardner et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2018). For a RJP to be successfully implemented, the literature suggests key practices for employers to consider, including: a) using an employee perspective/ tone or staff-word-of-mouth (Liu et al., 2018); b) highlighting the positive and negative aspects of the job, field, and employer (Gardner et al., 2009), which can be accomplished by utilizing experience-based information (a day in the life of an employee), being forthcoming with job data (turnover, burnout, longevity, etc.) and describing the organizational culture; c) ensuring the content of job ads and personnel utilized are credible information sources (Buda & Charnov, 2003); and d) ensuring that the information source is perceived to be knowledgeable as it enhances persuasiveness of recruiting tools (Liu et al., 2015). The latter can be accomplished by including professional *and* personal background information associated with employee testimonials. In this paper, we consider the use of RJPs for rural teacher attraction.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on person-organization (P-O) fit theory that describes the compatibility between an individual and the organization (e.g., school employer) (Boon et al.,

2011). Better fit has been theorized and documented to be linked with better employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and retention intentions (Youngs et al., 2015). While there is far less scholarship on P-O fit in education, for the most part, the positive non-education findings have been replicated in the school setting as well (Jones et al., 2013; Podgodzinski et al., 2013). Taking the applicant perspective within the recruitment context, P-O fit manifests itself in applicants' assessment of their value fit with the organization (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013).

In this study, we draw on employee perspectives to produce RJP for the development of recruitment content for rural "hard-to-staff" districts. It is important to note that while the RJP highlights the often-neglected advantages of teaching in rural schools, it does not "sugarcoat" the challenges of working in such districts. By highlighting both, RJP provides more credible information for applicants to determine P-O fit (Kaur & Dubey, 2014) and alignment of values. Not everyone is suited to teach in rural schools, but for the compatible individuals, the advantages will outweigh the challenges. The RJP is designed not only to increase the likelihood of recruitment, but retention of individuals who are more likely to stay.

Methods

In this section, we describe sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures for the study. Rurality is not static, as there is much variation between rural communities and schools (Eppley, 2015). This is why it was important for us to focus on a specific rural region so that the advantages and challenges we identify can be used to develop a RJP relevant to that particular rural region. To begin, we used a purposive sampling strategy to identify teachers and a principal from the rural South Carolina Lowcountry to invite to a professional development institute on place-based education, from which our sample was drawn. These educators are from five school districts state-identified as facing some of the most severe teacher shortages in the state (CERRA, 2019). These districts are disproportionately located in economically challenged and underdeveloped rural counties from historically marginalized regions of the country. Uncoincidentally, many of the schools within these districts are severely resource-constrained, given the area's low property values from which to draw revenue from (Tran, 2018).

Context and Place-based Education

The study was incorporated into the three-day summer professional development gathering, known as the Lowcountry Educator Institute (LEI). The institute was opened to teachers and administrators from rural school districts along coastal South Carolina, often referred to as the Lowcountry - which has a unique culture, geography, architecture, and even cuisine. While the Lowcountry shares traits with many other rural communities in that it is geographically isolated within the state, with a lack of industry, grocery outlets and entertainment amenities, it also shares traits with many urban communities in that it has concentrations of crime, gang activity and large population of people of color (County Health Rankings & Roadmaps, 2019).

Specifically, grounded in an approach that emphasizes place-based knowledge and resources, the institute helped the rural teachers better connect to their students, as well as other teachers, strengthening the capacity of the community in the process. Place-based knowledge has been described as a potential asset for rural students (Semken et al., 2017), but its utility as a teacher recruitment tool is not well understood. Place-based education is emerging as a response to the standardized, decontextualized curricula that has historically and contemporarily characterized our education system, one that can motivate teachers amidst the perennial and contemporary context of standardization and efficiency (Sobel, 2008). Specifically, place-based education can provide educators and students with real-life learning while developing an appreciation and understanding of local places, fostering a sense of community, and promoting students' agency in order to do meaningful work and answer important questions.

The research literature indicates an overall improvement in student engagement and in-depth learning and understanding when taught from a place-based framework (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2008). Place-based education has become a relevant topic for researchers and the greater educational community for its positive impact on developing students' sense of place, promoting community and environmental engagement, and on improving student learning and teacher/student motivation. From a human resources perspective, we wanted to learn from educators how place-based advantages could be emphasized to help ameliorate rural teacher staffing issues. As we see it, place-based

Table 1
Sample Demographic Information

| Race | Number of dependents | Highest degree attained | Grew up in the Lowcountry | Currently lives in the Lowcountry | Miles of commute from home to work | Years teaching in the Lowcountry |
|-----------|----------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| White=50% | M=1.63 | Bachelors=17%, | Yes=50% | Yes=75% | M=20.08 | M=11.33 |
| Black=50% | SD=1.36 | Masters=67%, Specialist=8%, Doctorate=8% | No=50% | No=25% | SD=24.67 | SD=8.15 |

education can also be considered an internal motivator for teacher recruitment and retention in rural communities.

Participant Characteristics

Twelve participants (eleven teachers and one principal) from the institute agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews to provide insight into their teaching experiences, as well as their perspectives on the advantages and challenges that are important for recruitment and retention in their rural, hard-to-staff contexts. A \$100 incentive was provided for their interview participation. The sample included educators that were 50% White and Black respectively, who grew up across diverse contexts (e.g., South Carolina, other states, and other nation states). While most participants spent their entire teaching career in the Lowcountry, about one-third had teaching experiences in other rural and non-rural contexts respectively.

The participants tended to be middle-aged (M= 47.33, SD= 8.85), with the youngest being 32 and the oldest being 57, and all but one participant was female. They spent an average of 9.5 years teaching at the school district (SD =7.37) and 9.25 years teaching at their current school (SD=7.29). See Table 1 for more demographic information.

Interview Focus and Analysis

The semi-structured interview questions focused on the advantages and challenges of living and teaching in rural communities and gave the participants opportunities to discuss these issues in relation to teacher recruitment and retention in their own voices. The interviews were transcribed using the transcription service REV. Data analysis was consonant with our methods and featured an iterative process of inductive and deductive coding (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Glesne, 2015; Glesne & Peshkin, 1991). Specifically, analysis began with an open

coding process whereby we examined interview transcripts individually and then as a team, reading and re-reading the transcripts to look for patterns in participants' perspectives on challenges and advantages of teaching in rural communities. Through an inductive approach in an open coding process, we developed an initial set of 27 codes related to perceptions of rural teaching challenges and advantages. This phase involved identification of important sections of texts within the transcripts and assigning labels as they related to a theme or issue emerging in the data (King, 2004). Research team members coded independently in the first phase and then compared codes as a team. In so doing, the team created a hierarchical model, allowing us to analyze the texts at varying levels of specificity from a broader higher order like *perceptions of place to availability of social life in rural communities*. At this point, we developed a joint codebook. A second round of coding featured a deductive approach, using codes from the literature (e.g. class size, community support) as well as our list of inductive codes from our codebook. The codebook was applied to the data with a second reading of all texts. Researchers applied this second level of coding independently and then codes were compared for a final designation of themes. Using an iterative process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), we developed a set of themes related to challenges and advantages.

Thematic Findings

Advantages

When questioned about the rural advantages that may yield benefits for both rural teacher recruitment and retention, many common attributes and themes emerged. These included administrative support, family-oriented culture, strong community relations and tight networks among teachers, community members and students, smaller class sizes and teacher

autonomy. The majority of the themes reflected relational aspects of the job.

Stronger administrative support. When asked about the advantages at their rural schools that are beneficial for teacher staffing, one teacher shared, “I feel like there’s more support in the school. The administration is more supportive. With a smaller school district, the district is more supportive.” Another teacher highlighted the importance of not just attuning to recruitment and summarized that financial incentives may fill rural vacancies, but appropriate support is needed for teacher retention. According to her, these supports included teaching and resource assistance, the latter of which is particularly relevant given that “a lot of our teachers put their own money into the classroom.”

At the place-based institute from which we obtained our sample from, several teachers attended the professional development with their principal. Those teachers appreciated the leadership of their principal because she modeled her value of development and demonstrated her support of them by learning with them. A teacher who serves in the same school with the aforementioned principal noted, “Whenever our principal sends something out, all of us look at it and we are like ‘are you going, are you going...kind of like that. Ok, let’s all go.’”

In sum, administrative support is critical for continued teacher employment, but especially in small rural schools where teachers often have less instructional support, classroom resources or professional development opportunities. The small setting magnifies the positive impact of administrative support and some rural school principals are able to capitalize on this.

Family oriented culture. One of the advantages of teaching in rural school districts is that the teachers, students, and administrators experience deeper camaraderie. According to the teacher respondents, since the community is smaller and everyone knows each other, the teachers can really bond. A teacher stated one of the advantages to teaching in a rural school,

I would say the teacher camaraderie. That’s in big cities... I noticed...we had a lot of funding. We had everything, but the teachers were ‘my class, my class, my class’ whereas the rural areas the teachers are like, ‘ok, this is what I have extra, what do you need? Ok, I can give you this.’

A principal agreed when she stated:

Yes, we are family. I don’t know if you guys noticed a lot of us showed up, so we talked a lot. We are family, and we showed we are family, when we are at work also. That made me feel welcomed. I lived in [a big city], but I never interacted with all the teachers at the school. I was only my children’s teachers.

Another teacher shared her thoughts on her school: The camaraderie and coming from a school with a thousand students to a school with 400-500 students, there is a big difference, expectations are different. With the teachers, I felt welcomed at that school. They are willing to help me with anything that I need help with... I felt that they were there for me.

The findings here are consistent with the literature linking camaraderie of teachers and students with intrinsic motivation to work at a particular school (Fuller et al., 2016). It also suggests alignment between what the rural schools offered and what the participants sought.

Strong community relations and tight networks. Interviewees talked about the importance of belonging or inclusion into the social fabric of the community as an advantage of teaching in the rural community. As one teacher put it, “I know the families. I know their children, their children’s siblings. I mean, so it’s a closer network. I enjoy that aspect of it.” Closely related, another teacher explained that: “There’s a lot tighter community. The communities support the schools, at least [school C] does. They’re always doing school nights and our principal goes out... the whole community is actively involved in raising its children.”

Several teachers explained that acclimating teachers to their communities will improve classroom teaching because they will better understand their students. As one teacher shared,

I think that they need to make the new teachers coming to the district aware of what the community is like, and what issues that some of the children might be facing in that community, and some of the disadvantages that those children have versus children in more urban or suburbia.

Rural teacher respondents consistently shared the deep connections they have with their students as being a distinguishing feature of their school that

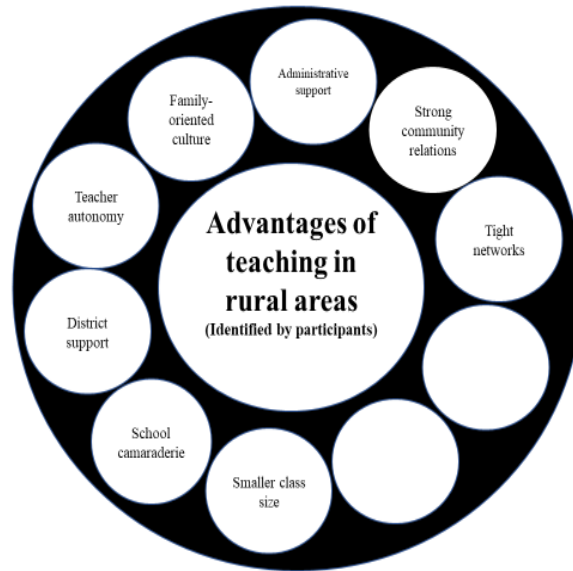


Figure 3. Advantages of teaching in rural areas (identified by participants)

affected them in a positive way. One teacher shared an example of being physically assaulted by a gang-affiliated 6th grade student, who she later ended up bonding with in class. Because of the small size of the community, the teacher was able to follow the life events of the student years after he left her class. He had become a father and works at Walmart to support his family. He returned to her class to speak to the students to let them know “the struggle’s real.” Now, every time she sees him, they embrace and she expressed a sense of immense pride for him. Other teachers similarly shared powerful relationships they developed with their students, including having the opportunity to educate several members of a student’s family, sometimes across generations.

Smaller class sizes. Another advantage that was pointed out by the participants was smaller class sizes. As one of the teachers stated,

Smaller class sizes, better peer community relationships that help to promote more success among students... It's a more cohesive bond in terms of being able to relate to parents, and parents being able to relate back to you.

Often the rural schools have smaller student bodies and this provides teachers with an opportunity to provide more individualized attention and opportunity to know their students. Another rural teacher succinctly explained, “I like the smaller classes, I like the smaller school.”

Teacher autonomy. In addition to being a part of the community, teachers in rural schools feel that they have more autonomy in their own classrooms to make a meaningful change. A teacher stated, “You get a chance ... I feel like I'm more able to change things. I'm more a part of changing the school for better rather than just being a piece of it.” Another teacher added:

So, doing the science hands-on experience, or experiments and things, is really amazing. I get to do that with my kids. The parents are very supportive. We can go outside. Like sort of at a slower pace, it's more flexible, there's more space for me to take the kids places with the school campus area.

In an era of increasing standardization and alignment of curriculum and instructional approaches with tests, teacher autonomy and professionalization have often been reduced in many districts (Phi Delta Kappa, 2018). Indeed, Ingersoll (1996) and others have long written extensively about de-professionalization of teachers and how this treatment and lack of autonomy has contributed to teacher turnover in the profession. In our sample schools and districts, by contrast, teachers shared that they had autonomy to make professional decisions. Figure 3 summarizes the advantages of teaching in rural areas as identified by the study participants.

Challenges. When questioned about the rural challenges or disadvantages that must be considered and addressed by rural school districts, there was a correspondence between the literature and participants' perceptions from interview data. These themes included lack of economic opportunities, cultural isolation, and small-town politics. Furthermore, reinforcing the diversity between rural communities (Eppley, 2015) and justifying our focus on a particular rural region, were unique challenges identified by our rural participants who are not typically associated with rurality, including the gang presence and cultural challenges with rural employment of international teachers (given the lack of local availability of teachers). In other words, challenges of fit are unique to rural communities, around national culture, as well as disparities between the teacher and the rural organization.

Lack of economic opportunities.

For the teachers, all participants talked at length about the disadvantages related to low teacher pay. As one teacher put it, "It's all about the money." For the students, many participants identified the lack of economic opportunities for their students as well. As one teacher put it, "[y]ou're educating these children and they have nothing to look forward to...there's no opportunities here in a rural area for them to want to stay here." Others, including teachers from a neighboring rural district, made similar comments.

I hate the fact that we do have families that are in poverty, that the children that I am teaching have nowhere to go once they graduate. There are no businesses here for them, that they'll probably leave and not come back.

Across these quotes, we see teachers who see the lack of local industry as the primary reasons for their low pay and students leaving the area.

Cultural isolation. In many interviews, participants talked about differences between their personal backgrounds and the backgrounds of their students. They had to come to terms with the cultural differences, how to relate, and what they perceived as cultural isolation in rural communities. As one teacher shared,

Just being able to have that convenience of getting in the car and go five minutes to the theatre, or going shopping so somewhere, that's kind of downfall, it is a small city so you don't have much as convenience as the larger city, and job opportunities.

In general, participants also talked about the disadvantages of geographic and cultural isolation. For example, another teacher commented,

So, we don't have the business or culture, you know, we don't have a movie theatre. We don't have a children's museum where children can go. Things like that...We have to travel a good distance to get to a zoo.

While technology can bridge the differences with culture, many children do not have access to the internet. One teacher explained, "A child may not have internet access at home, and so you have to find alternatives, help them to work with what you are doing with classroom, while at home."

Interestingly, and somewhat differing from mainstream understandings of rural challenges, some participants identified disadvantages related to gangs.

I just would love to see some kind of industry come into the area, because unfortunately there's not much for our kids to do. The gangs, and that's more enticing to them, because nobody's at home with them, and I would like to see some industries come in to build the community back up to where it once was.

Such perceptions of gangs as an alternative to employment in industries are often associated with urban areas. This demonstrates the unique nuances associated with different rural communities.

Cultural exchange barriers. Some teachers struggled with culture due to national cultural differences. With the severe teacher shortage in South Carolina, many small districts have recruited teachers from other countries through a cultural exchange program. While the cultural exchange of international teachers provided rural communities with opportunities for cultural enhancement, there were many barriers or disadvantages associated with the employment of the international teachers. One cultural exchange teacher talked at length about how she was perceived by local parents. Her experiences aligned with others from similar backgrounds, when she explained,

Parents want to have their children removed from their class, because I wasn't an American teacher. They complain that students were not understanding because I don't speak English. Words were misunderstood because of cultural differences, I had students who just they lied about what I did in the classroom... And so, me, going into my second year here, moving into a

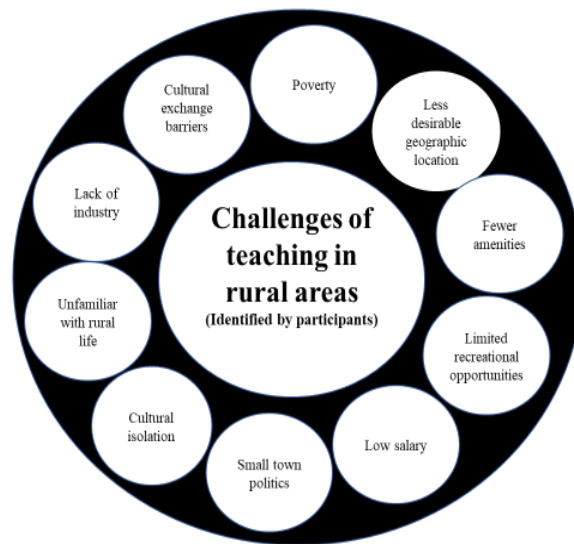


Figure 4. Challenges of teaching in rural areas (identified by participants)

new school and a new job that atmosphere with a teacher is different, where I am coming from, it was more...we can't afford to give you a mentor. [You don't get a new teacher mentor] because you have been teaching for many years. [To me] ...[i]t doesn't matter if you've been teaching 20 years in a new environment. The culture in that school in that area is different from wherever you were. And so, whatever stipulation for a new teacher living in college should be applied to a new teacher move into a new school. All of the international teachers talked about the growing number of international teachers from cultural exchange programs in rural South Carolina schools in relation to the low teacher salaries in the state. As one teacher put it,

I'm staying because I'm from a different country and my economic situation is different. But for someone who was born in the U.S., who has the privilege to move anywhere they want to go, they're not going to stay here and do this...It's the salary package, is too low if you want to attract. And there are far too many international teachers coming into South Carolina because the United States of America is not focused on what is happening in South Carolina. The people are not staying. The turnover for teachers is way too high.

Small town political connections. Several participants talked about the strong community

connections as both a challenge and an advantage in that a strong sense of community can also give rise to politics and differential treatment for children from particular families with a strong network or social capital in the community. As one participant explained, tension can arise when you try to enforce policies but everyone knows each other (e.g., students are children of your business partner). Similarly, another participant acknowledged, "As a teacher, you're still going to do the right thing for students, even if you are threatened, and teachers are often threatened with 'You don't know who you're messing with.' You're still going to do the right thing, but being in a small town, small rural town, that can be complicated as well. It has its pros and its cons." Figure 4 summarizes the challenges of teaching in rural areas as identified by study participants.

The Sample RJP content

Balancing the advantages and challenges that our sampled rural educators face as identified by the interview themes and quotes, coupled with best practices for implementing RJPs as suggested in the literature (Gardner et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2018), we developed a sample RJP for a hypothetical district based on the Lowcountry rural locale to be posted on electronic recruitment channels. The sample is meant to serve as a practical example to aid rural school districts appeal to a wider candidate pool to fill their teacher shortages. For the purposes of this

We're a rural school district that works with enterprising educators from around the globe to make a difference in the lives of some of the neediest students in the state. We're looking for smart and passionate colleagues to join our growing team.

Our family oriented culture and tight knit community is instrumental in light of lacking industry, limited cultural, and social outlets. What we lack in economic opportunities, we make up for in rich local resources. With smaller class sizes, our educators are more autonomous without sacrificing strong administrative support.

English Teacher
Elementary | \$32k

Science Teacher
Middle School | \$35k

Figure 5. Introduction to school district with open positions in sample RJP

Our greatest asset is you!

We've partnered with some dedicated and innovative educators that expose students to new, different and exciting opportunities. We're proud to say that we've helped our students go on to promising careers or to college.

FAMILY ORIENTED CULTURE
"Even at work, we are family, and we show it everyday. That made me feel welcomed. I lived in a big city, but never interacted with all the teachers until I moved here."
--Robert Anderson, Middle Level Math Teacher (7th year teaching)

AUTONOMY
"I feel like I'm able to change things. I'm more a part of changing the school for the better rather than just being a piece of it."
--Mary Davis, Elementary Teacher (4th year teaching)

SMALLER CLASS SIZES
"Smaller class sizes... its a more cohesive bond in terms of being able to relate to parents, and parents being able to relate back to you."
--Suzy Platt, High School Science Teacher (15th year teaching)

STRONGER ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
"I feel like there is more support in the school. The administration is more supportive. With a smaller school district, the district is more supportive."
--John Smith, Middle Level English Teacher (2nd year teaching)

Figure 6. School culture and employee testimonial in sample RJP

publication, the sample RJP is segmented. See Figures 5 and 6.

In this example, several RJP best practices from the literature illuminate what to expect of rural education employment. First, both the positive and negative aspects of a rural school district are highlighted in the job ad. In fact, the benefits are used to counterbalance the challenges so as not to deter a prospective employee's interest. The example includes language that would appeal to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors in the employment decision-making process, including, but not limited

to: salary, job outcomes (student success), job culture (way of life), sense of community (belonging), and person-organization fit. Within the job advertisement, an employee testimonial adds credibility by providing an employee perspective and listing their professional background information. This RJP uses the themes outlined in the study as well as direct quotes from the participants. A job preview such as this should broaden a school district's applicant pool, and likely enhance an educator's tenure, by providing realistic and palatable information about rural education employment from the onset.

Conclusion

Poor rural school districts often have fewer financial resources and correspondingly lower teacher salary offerings (Tran, 2018) that render them less financially competitive than their counterparts (Hammer et al., 2005). Therefore, from a practical perspective, it has been suggested that rural districts should also emphasize non-financial strategies in their staffing efforts (Maranto & Shuls, 2012). In this study, we purposely sought to avoid the usual deficit model often employed to analyze rural education, by intentionally balancing the challenges of rural teacher staffing with positive social advantages associated with rurality. In fact, this is aligned with more recent research that has demonstrated “a rising sensitivity to the concept of ‘a sense of place’ or ‘place attachment’ [which has] provided a way forward for those wishing to move away from deficit perspectives” (Biddle & Azano, 2016, p. 314).

Findings from this study provide evidence substantiating the importance of providing rural teacher experiences in teacher preparation programs as opportunities for professional growth (Tran et al., 2015). Many of the participants did not have prior experience in rural settings, which resulted in an added stress (on top of teaching in general) for them as they had to adjust to their lack of familiarity with the geographical contexts and working with students from a different background than they are used to. These findings corroborate earlier research about the importance of the pre-service students’ teaching location for their eventual employment (Krieg et al., 2016) and that districts that host more student teachers rely less on teachers with emergency teaching credentials (a proxy for teacher shortage) (Goldhaber et al., 2019).

Exposing pre-service teachers to teaching in rural contexts is critical because one-fifth of all students in the country attend rural schools (Johnson et al., 2014). State Department of Educations and Universities can work in partnership to help expand those opportunities to promote pre-service teacher engagement with a multitude of community contexts, which has implications for improving teacher staffing at hard-to-staff schools.

Leveraging advantages of the context is promising because past scholarship has suggested that one of the most effective rural teaching staffing strategies is that it must be “rooted within the community” (Hammer et al., 2005, p. 12). Beyond the advantages, this study confronts the very real challenges that many rural teachers face concerning their employment decisions, carefully avoiding a one-sided glamorization of rural life. It became obvious from our data analysis that certain attributes of rural communities can be interpreted as an advantage and a challenge. For example, rural teachers are much more visible and cannot easily fade into anonymity unlike their counterparts in larger urban contexts (Anttila & Vaananen, 2013). However, rural teachers in our study felt that deeper connections with the community sustained their desire to remain teaching at their schools. The teachers perceived that they made a bigger difference in the lives of the students since the classes were smaller and there were fewer classroom disruptions. These advantages balanced out the challenges for our participants, but they may not for others. Consequently, P-O fit between prospective teachers and the community/school is critical if there is hope to not only recruit teachers, but also retain them. One method to proactively provide candidates information to determine that fit is through RJPs.

Maranto & Shuls (2012) advise that “[s]chool districts should use their web-page to sell their school to potential applicants. This should be a place to highlight the unique things about a school “...They further argue that rural districts” ...could also highlight small town environments, low housing costs outdoor recreation, scenery, or other potentially attractive aspects of the school or community” (p. 8). We argue that rural districts can adopt a marketing approach by using RJPs to highlight the assets, challenges and attributes that make their locale unique and appealing on a local, regional and even national level. Our study provided an example of how this can be done for a specific rural community in order to capture the contextual nuance and provide rural school districts this strategy to include in their recruitment toolkit. Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness of RJPs for rural teacher recruitment and retention.

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