

## Promising Practice: Book Studies as Professional Development for Rural Teachers

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## *Promising Practice*

### **Book Studies as Professional Development for Rural Teachers**

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*This promising practice article describes conducting book studies as professional development in rural communities. In this article, we share our understanding of the importance of this type of professional development in rural schools, as well as considerations for those who wish to start something similar in their districts.*

Access to meaningful and effective professional development (PD) can be limited in rural communities (Howley & Howley, 2005; Skyhar, 2020). For rural teachers to continue to develop their practice, meaningful and effective PD is important. Research has shown that when PD is targeted and specific, it is more useful for participating teachers (Burbank et al., 2010). Targeted and specific PD can take the form of a book study, where teachers read a common text and meet weekly to discuss the reading and its relation to their students and their instructional practices (Burbank et al., 2010). In this project we operationalize Blanton et al.'s (2020) definition of book studies: "A professional book study is defined as any planned group discussion of a particular text or texts as a means of furthering professional understanding of a specific subject or phenomenon" (p. 1018).

One way to help provide contextualized PD for rural teachers is to have teachers reflect on their positionality in their rural schools through participation in a book study focused on a rural education issue. Yendol-Hoppey and Fichtman (2010) argued that book studies as PD development "promote conversations among teachers leading to the application of new knowledge in classrooms powerful enough to improve existing professional skills as well as lead to school change and community building" (p. 59), and Azano and colleagues (2021) stated, "an explicit focus on rural contexts and the strategies rural teachers can use to feel connected to their communities and their profession can help new (and experienced) teachers thrive" (p. xi, emphasis in original). As teachers and staff read and participate in discussion about a text, they can reflect on how they position themselves as teachers in a rural school and how they support their rural students' future goals.

We share a promising practice about a book study conducted with rural teachers in one rural high

school in the Midwest. We discuss what we found and what we learned in order to provide a structure for book study PD with rural teachers.

#### **Rural Teaching and Professional Development**

When making the decision to become a teacher, one takes on the dedication to being a lifelong learner. Embracing this lifelong learning can take place with PD opportunities. Research on PD has suggested it is more powerful when it is contextually appropriate and can be connected to subject matter content (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983; Hunzicker, 2011; Skyhar, 2020). Moreover, Vu (as cited in Blanton et al., 2020) suggested professional learning be "collaborative, dialogic, reflective, and job-embodied" (p. 1015).

In their editorial for the April 2022 issue of *English Education*, focused on rural English teaching, Parton and Azano succinctly stated "context matters" (p. 172). When determining what influences a rural teacher's positionality, factors important to the specific rural context in which the school and district are situated should be taken into consideration (Whaland, 2020). However, commonalities exist across multiple contexts. For example, Wynhoff Olsen and colleagues (2022) suggested a rural sense of belonging (SOB) is important to thriving in a rural community, but a rural SOB is as complex as rurality itself. Someone can have a SOB as an English teacher but not as a rural community member or vice versa. Context is as important to rural SOB as it is to rural teaching.

Another layer of being a rural teacher is the increasing diversity of rural spaces. According to DiCerbo and Baker (2021), "rural areas of the United States now encounter a diversity of students similar to what their urban neighbors experienced decades ago" (p. 95). While their study is focused on English language learners (ELLs), their findings are salient for our context, too. Through the creation of a

cultural autobiography, rural teachers were able to reflect on their positionality in relation to their students, how their lives aligned with or were similar to their students' lives, and how those aspects of being a rural teacher are intertwined (DiCerbo & Baker, 2021). Reflecting on these aspects of their identities can provide opportunities for teachers who do not share the racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds of their students to "take up roles that empower them to approach teaching from a culturally based perspective rather than the norm and policies of rural districts" (DiCerbo & Baker, 2021, p. 106). Having the opportunity to reflect on themselves helped to "make the unfamiliar familiar" (p. 106).

In rural schools, PD can help retain teachers by making professional connections and limiting the feeling of professional isolation (Whaland, 2020). However, meaningful PD in rural areas can be a challenge to new teachers in rural schools (Wenger et al., 2012). One way to ensure PD follows these tenets is to use book studies as PD. Our book study was designed to allow teachers opportunities to engage with topics related to being a rural teacher, while also developing a community of learners.

### **Rural Context**

Despite its fairly rigid, square county lines, our state's school districts are anything but. Schools in our state are situated in sprawling districts whose boundaries jut, cut, and abut in order to catch a town here, an incorporated community there. The two largest metro areas are situated in smaller districts; districts in the northwestern region of our state span multiple counties, while districts in the southern region take up nearly the entire county. The size and sprawl of these district boundaries paint a clear picture of how spread out our rural districts are.

Bundy Southeast Finch (BSF)<sup>1</sup> is a consolidated school district that spans both Finch and Jackson counties. The district began, like many districts in the area and time, in the early 1990s, by first sharing a few sports followed by whole grade merging in 1993. Bundy, being the biggest town, boasts a decent array of businesses, including two grocery stores, a pharmacy, a medical clinic, a veterinary clinic, a dentist, several mechanic garages, two gas stations, a chiropractor, a fitness/community center, a dance studio, a pool, a golf course, and a Dollar General.

Main Street has two restaurants, a bar, several salons, and other small businesses. Nearby communities like Bower, Holden, and Birkley have smaller businesses in the form of restaurant/bars or mechanic shops.

### **Why a Book Study**

According to Blanton et al. (2020), "adult learners . . . rely on connections with their own experience and understanding of teaching practices, and on their positions as educators" (p. 1019). Professional book studies allow the time necessary to dialogue and construct knowledge together, making connections with experience and developing their teaching practices and their position as educators. We selected a group of rural teachers to participate in our book study to help us better understand how rural teachers construct their conceptions of rural teaching when given the opportunity to engage with a rural education issue.

With a strong understanding of the structure of book studies, the building team leader at BSF High School ensured each of these tenets was followed. We chose a relevant text (described in the next section), designated a time for participation (Tuesdays before school), and developed questions to foster sharing of personal experiences and responses. The teachers in the district met in Skip's classroom every Tuesday before school for four weeks for 30–40 minutes of discussion time. Erika joined virtually.

### **Choosing a Book**

Choosing a book for a book study as PD requires knowing the teachers with whom you are working and understanding their needs and context. For our context, because Skip is a teacher at BSF High School and has an understanding of what teachers may need, we chose to use *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America* (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), as our guiding text for our conversations. Skip suggested this book because he uses it in his English classes as part of a research project with his students. His students found this text to resonate with them and their experiences as rural, Midwestern students. Moreover, this text focuses on a rural school district in our state. The book is a case study exploring rural students' choices to stay, leave, or return and how adults in their lives influence and reinforce their choices. Because of the

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<sup>1</sup> All school, town, and teacher names are pseudonyms.

ethnographic context and its connection to other rural communities in our state, we felt it was an appropriate text for teachers to explore.

When choosing a book for a professional book study with teachers, they can be involved in the selection process. Instead of trying to assume or guess what teachers need, ask them. Surveys can be a great way to garner information on what teachers need from PD and to provide voting options for possible texts. Providing teachers with some agency in choosing what books are part of this experience puts their needs at the forefront, which is important to targeted and specific PD opportunities.

### What We Observed

As teachers read *Hollowing Out the Middle*, we found teachers were not only connecting what they read to their experiences as rural students and teachers, but they were also willing to critically examine their stances as they read. For example, Joseph reflected on his experience as a rural student, stating he found it difficult to place where he would fall into the category of achiever, “the high-achieving, most-likely-to-succeed students destined for highly regarded colleges” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 29); stayer, students who will graduate high school and enter the workforce and never leave their hometown; seeker, students who want to experience life outside their hometown, but “often lack their college-bound peers’ academic or economic assets” (p. 90); or returner, students who were seekers but “boomerang home after their new lives fail to take hold” (p. 107). He felt he did not cleanly fit into any of these categories, suggesting categorizing students in this manner can be highly problematic. Teachers were also willing to critique the authors on their stance and view of rural Midwestern communities. They felt the authors were suggesting teachers are complicit in forcing the best and brightest out of their communities, but they highlighted important nuances to consider why people leave, such as available real estate, career opportunities in their field of study, or economic conditions.

Much like Petrin et al. (2014) argued in response to *Hollowing Out the Middle*, it is not that the schools or educators support the best and brightest students’ needing to leave to achieve; instead, teachers are often supportive of aspirations to stay in a rural community. Genevieve stated she does not feel teachers focus their time and energy on the achievers because “we know they’re going to be okay. So we are going to kids that are going to need to take more

of our time ... and thank God we are there for them and they need us.” She felt “we should be pouring more into the stayers because they’re the ones that are going to build our community.” Genevieve’s stance on supporting the stayers was evident of discussions around the students whom teachers felt needed their support: those who plan to stay in their community.

At the end of the book study, we asked teachers how they thought this experience would affect their future thinking and/or actions. Overall, they felt they would be “more aware ... if they are telling achievers to leave ... basically give them all the opportunities whether they’re an achiever or whatever” (Denise). Moreover, Joseph suggested teachers work with community members to understand what opportunities are available to students once they graduate high school. As Skip mentioned, students may want to open a business locally, but places available for rent may be owned by someone in a “big city out of state,” which makes it hard to keep rent low for business owners. However, the group felt their community was doing something right because their real estate market has limited property availability.

After we analyzed the data, we concluded we learned more about how to structure a book study for rural teachers than we did about the impact on perceptions of rural teaching. Sure, we identified some points of interest to explore further, but what we found to be the most impactful for rural teachers is contextualized PD. A few key things to keep in mind when conducting PD in rural schools in the form of book studies include:

- Invite teachers from all disciplines and grade levels to join. Subject-specific PD is important, too, but interdisciplinary PD allows for a variety of perspectives to be shared.
- Involve teachers in the selection of professional texts to read. When teachers have a choice in what they read, they have more agency, more investment, and can make more personal connections.
- Supplement the professional text with other rural research and perspectives to provide a critical frame for the project. When we read *Hollowing Out the Middle*, we did not provide any additional readings. Perhaps if teachers had read Petrin and colleagues’ (2014) study, they would have felt more validated in their observations.

- Provide adequate time to engage in discussion of the professional texts, meaning a time when teachers are available for at least one hour, once a week. We found anything less than one hour is not sufficient to engage in conversation about thoughts and observations.
- Create discussion questions that provide opportunities for teachers to make connections to their practice. Making explicit connections can help make PD timelier and more purposeful.
- Conduct a follow-up survey about impacts on teaching practices. One of the main purposes of PD is for it to translate into classroom practice. A follow-up survey a few weeks after PD can provide information on how it translated into teachers' classroom practices and shed light on topics for future book study PD opportunities.

## Conclusion

PD is important to being an effective teacher; it helps teachers stay current and prepared for the students in their classrooms. In all aspects of PD, research has shown it needs to be contextually appropriate, but PD is often not relevant to its participants. For rural communities this issue is compounded by unique needs and contexts, highlighting the importance of contextualized PD for rural teachers. Conducting a book study as PD has the power to make PD contextually appropriate. Whether a district-wide or school-level PD opportunity, book studies provide opportunities for teachers to take a general concept or educational practice and find contextualized connections. Providing opportunities for teachers to examine their practice in critical ways helps them to improve their practice to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

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