A Long Trek: Systems of Support and Isolation in Rural Teachers' Professional Development

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the various ways that teachers in two school districts in rural northern Wisconsin participate in professional development. This case study research analyzes interview data with two teachers, their administrators, and a Cooperative Educational Service Agency professional using a critical sociocultural framework in order to understand the intersections of rurality and professional development in the teachers' personal and professional lives. Participants' stories revealed that there are many barriers that make the process of engaging in professional development difficult: long distances, lack of economic resources, and heavy workloads that require a lot of time and energy both inside and outside of school. Despite these challenges, the participants in this study found systems of support among their colleagues and within district policies to allow for professional learning. By examining participants' narratives in light of dominant narratives about rural people and places, this study also finds that rural teachers' personal and professional lives intersect in complex and nuanced ways particular to their individual rural contexts. Finally, this study calls for deeper and more robust research about the intricate connections between rural teachers' professional lives and the context in which they teach.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Even though I grew up and went to school in a rural area of northern Wisconsin, it didn't really occur to me to think about the effects that my rural context had on my life, my teaching, and my research until quite recently. In fact, it wasn't until I began to consider graduate school six years ago that I really started to think about how rurality had impacted me. Looking back, there were many experiences and examples that seemed insignificant at the time that now seem to represent touchstones on my path to this research. For example, I vividly remember my first interview for my first full-time teaching job, which happened to be a one-year position teaching high school English in the high school from which I had graduated. The school had hired a new principal during the time I was in college, so the man who led the interview was unfamiliar to me, though he knew my mother quite well from her job teaching second grade in that same district. Furthermore, the other English teachers participating in the interview had been my former teachers, so, while this was my first time meeting the principal, he already knew that I had family ties and lots of history with the school and the community. Still, near the end of the interview, Mr. Hirsch[1] began telling me about some of the benefits of the position. He told me, "[Pine] is in a really beautiful area of the state. There are lots of things to do outdoors, and it's only an hour and fifteen minute drive to a city with a mall so you can go shopping on the weekends." Of course, I already knew about the benefits of living in Pine and how far it was to a mall, but this statement made me feel suddenly embarrassed. I wondered if he thought I seemed so young that I hung out in malls on weekends or whether he thought I was so naïve that I chose my jobs based on their proximity to malls. It must not have been as bad as all that because Mr.

[1] All names and places are pseudonyms.

Hirsch did offer me the position, and I happily took it. The statement has stuck with me though. Four years later, as I was contemplating leaving my classroom to pursue graduate school, I thought back on this interview. I began to think about Mr. Hirsch's statements from another perspective. Perhaps his reassurance that Pine offered amenities and a high quality of life were part of his interview process no matter who the candidate; it wasn't just the fact that I looked very young. Perhaps he knew that many of the candidates he would interview for jobs would need to be convinced that there was more to offer in Pine than just a job. Perhaps he had lost other teachers to Pine's lack of big city amenities and wanted to develop a strategy to hire teachers who were likely to stay beyond that all-important first year. Thinking back on this, I started to realize that the rurality of the school hadn't been an issue for me because I was essentially coming home. But for others who applied and interviewed in Pine, what must that small city have looked like to them?

Since that time as a beginning teacher, I have had many more opportunities to think about the impact that rurality has had on my life and work. I chose to study rural education in my doctoral program as a way of thinking more deeply about that impact—in order to think about the aspects of education that are universal and the aspects of education that truly are unique to rural places. One part of a researcher's job is to make the familiar strange and to make the strange familiar. It took me quite awhile to realize that what was familiar to me was "strange" to many others. My experiences living and teaching in rural areas were not like other teachers' experiences, and place played a big part in defining some of those differences. I further realized that rural places held a sort of mythological space in many people's minds; rural education seems familiar because of the commonplace narratives that come along with the idea of "rural." Even in the absence of experience in rural education, many researchers and educators feel that they

know what it means to teach and live in a rural place. Partly, this sense of simultaneous familiarity and strangeness is due to a lack of a shared definition of what it means to be located in a rural place, but it is compounded by the fact that people who live in rural areas are constantly defined in the dominant culture as "backward, uncouth, and unsophisticated" (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 18). Thus, when I chose to study rural education, and particularly rural teachers' professional development, I undertook a study that would break down some of the misconceptions about what rural education looks like and also would celebrate some of the unique features that make rural places rural.

Relevant Literature

Rural education and the experiences of rural teachers are not often studied in educational research. Nearly every journal article and book that focuses on rural education bemoans the lack of research on which to draw (see, for example, Arnold et al, 2005; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bouck, 2004). Yet rural education remains an area of great concern for policymakers and the people who populate rural areas. Given the fact that "over half of all operating school districts and one-third of all public schools in the United States were in rural areas" in 2003-2004 (Provasnik, KewalRamani, McLaughlin Coleman, Gilberston, Herring, & Xie, 2007), the status of rural education and the experiences of the teachers who teach in rural areas seems a pressing issue. While the educational climate and pressures that face rural schools are not unique to rural areas (budgetary concerns and high-stakes testing are two such pressures affecting most districts regardless of their designation of urban, suburban, or rural), many of the constraints are compounded in rural areas because of a multitude of other factors that affect rural areas particularly (Arnold et al, 2005; Davis, 2009; Huysman, 2008; Mollenkopf, 2005; Williams, 2003). Furthermore, the majority of the research that has been done in rural areas focuses on

quantitative analysis of school performance and student achievement. While this type of research is crucial to our understanding of rural education, it overlooks important implications that can come from understanding individual teachers' experiences in rural districts. In their review of existing rural education literature, Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) found "No higher- or medium-quality studies" in their sample about the topic of teachers' beliefs and practices (p. 13). Without further qualitative study of rural education, we are left with a large gap in our knowledge about what it means to be a teacher in America.

Just as there are not many studies of rural education in the existing educational literature, there are even fewer studies that focus on the experiences of teachers and their professional development in these contexts. This lack of research is due partly to the lack of funding for rural research and the greater attention paid to urban districts in universities and teacher preparation programs. The massive evaluation of rural educational research conducted by Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, and Dean (2005) identified nine priority topics for future research. Teacher quality, especially as it relates to the recruitment, development, and retention of teachers in rural contexts, was among the areas of identified need. Combined with increased calls for teachers' professional development in policy documents such as Wisconsin's PI34 that requires schools to provide "the resources, time and opportunities for all faculty to engage in professional development to enhance intellectual and professional vitality," it seems clear that more research is needed to understand how teachers in rural, isolated school districts are engaging in professional development (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2010). Of the existing research in teachers' professional development in rural contexts, Howley and Howley (2005) point out that rurality provides both benefits and constraints to professional development. By focusing on how rural settings impact understandings of professional development, they urge a

deeper connection with place in educational research: "The clear difficulty in this instance is that such high-quality programs—ones that are very good and that actively engage rural meanings—rarely exist, even though 49 percent of American districts are located in rural places" (Howley & Howley, 2005, p. 3). This study, then, seeks to fill some of these gaps in the literature by focusing on the stories of two rural educators' experiences with professional development.

Research Methodology

This study is designed to explore the intersections of rural education and professional development. Using a lens of critical sociocultural theory and by examining the professional development practices of teachers in two rural school districts in northern Wisconsin, this study was organized around the following questions:

- How do teachers engage, formally and informally, in professional development in two rural school districts in northern Wisconsin?
- What factors constrain and promote professional development in these two districts?
- What role does rurality play in teachers' professional lives?

As collective case study, this research focuses on both "what is common and what is particular about the case[s], but the end result regularly portrays something of the uncommon (Stouffer, 1941, cited in original)" (Stake, 2000, p. 438). In other words, the teachers who participated in this study represent unique cases that are remarkable for their particular engagement with professional development, but their engagement also has implications for the body of educational research literature related to professional development. Furthermore, this research examines the "complexities connecting ordinary practice in natural habitats to the abstractions and concerns" of this larger body of professional development literature (Stake, 2000, p. 440). With attention

to the effects of place and geography in the teachers' lives, these cases "encapsulate complex meanings into finite reports—and thus describe the cases in sufficient descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings and draw conclusions" (Stake, 2000, p. 439).

Data Collection and Analysis

Much of the data for this study comes from interviews with two teachers in the two school districts. I interviewed each of the teachers three times during the spring and summer of 2012. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, and we spoke in a variety of places of the teachers' choosing. I also interviewed the district administrator of each district. The district administrators both declined to speak in person, but both wrote responses to the interview questions I had sent them in advance. Finally, I interviewed a Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) professional. Wisconsin is divided into twelve CESA districts, and each district has its own CESA staff and building. The CESAs are state-funded agencies that are charged with supporting school districts in Wisconsin. CESAs serve a variety of functions for schools, including providing professional development for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators; offering the services of teachers who are trained to support hearing-impaired students; and providing volume discounts on things like paper, computers, and supplies (Harness, 2012). The two school districts in this study are both located in the same CESA, but each school district makes different use of the CESA services available to them. It is important to note, that school districts purchase services from the CESAs, so there are variations in the kinds of services CESAs provide to districts and individual teachers. In addition to the interviews, I collected data in the form of written and audio-recorded fieldnotes and documents

that outlined the school districts' policies and state and national documents related to professional development.

I transcribed all interview data and audio fieldnotes, and used the qualitative analysis software NVivo to identify codes and patterns in the data. Using a cyclical process of coding, I first coded the data using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). I chose words and phrases that were descriptive of the narratives that the participants told in their interviews and, through an iterative process of line-by-line coding and comparing codes I condensed the individual codes into categories that cut across multiple participants' interviews, observational data, and document analysis data. Throughout the process, I wrote analytical and process memos to record my thoughts about the patterns that arose in the coding process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 123).

Sycamore

The village of Sycamore has a population of less than 500 residents[2], a population that has been in decline for nearly 20 years. However, Sycamore hasn't always had so few residents. Around the turn of the 19th century when Sycamore was a resource-rich lumber, fur-trapping, and farming community, the population topped 1,200 people. Sycamore is proud of its many recreational opportunities, calling itself a "paradise for all outdoor enthusiasts" (Welcome to [Sycamore], 2008). As such, Sycamore and the surrounding areas of northern Wisconsin are popular vacation destinations for people who like to camp, hunt, fish, and enjoy water sports. The median household income for families in Sycamore is around $32,000 per year, $20,000 less than the statewide median household income. Sycamore is not a racially diverse community; as of the 2010 Census, 97% of the residents identify as White, while 2% identify as American Indian, and 1% identify as Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau, 2013). These

[2] The exact population counts are withheld to protect the identities of the study participants.

demographics are reflected in the school population as well (Department of Public Instruction, 2012). Sycamore School District is one of the major employers in the community, along with a few manufacturing companies in nearby towns. More than just a source of employment, though, the Sycamore School District building is a visible point of pride for the people in the community. The building houses grades pre-K through 12 and serves just under 200 students in one large, beautiful, and recently constructed building. Although 65% of the students in the Sycamore School District are considered economically disadvantaged (as determined by their qualification for free or reduced-cost lunch) (Department of Public Instruction, 2012), the people in the Sycamore community make the school a priority, often finding creative ways to fund school functions even in times of economic hardship.

Hawthorn

Located in a neighboring county, Hawthorn shares many characteristics with Sycamore. Slightly less populous than Sycamore, Hawthorn's population is also less than 500, and like Sycamore, Hawthorn has a history of population decline. Hawthorn also has a history in the logging industry and currently relies heavily on tourism as visitors avail themselves of the beautiful natural resources. Hawthorn is slightly more racially diverse with 86% identifying as White, 13% identifying as American Indian, and 1% Black or African American. Hawthorn's median household income for a family is about $12,000, which indicates a key difference between Hawthorn and Sycamore. The Hawthorn School District building also houses grades pre-K through 12, and the district serves 280 students. The building itself is unique and a focal point of the community. It has undergone several stages of renovation to add on and refurbish older parts of the building. Hawthorn School District has had a more difficult time with school funding and has had several discussions of consolidating with other districts in the area. With

one of the largest geographical regions in the state, however, it is very difficult to consolidate with another district while also maintaining reasonable bus rides for the students.

This research was conducted during a time of particular importance for Wisconsin's teachers. Because of recent legislation that essentially dismantled teachers' collective bargaining rights in Wisconsin, data for this study were collected during a time that saw teachers at the center of a contentious and very public debate about their working conditions. Thus, although this study does not focus on the particular effects of such legislation on the working conditions of the teachers in this study, it is an aspect of the context that cannot be overlooked. It is also important to note that both Hawthorn and Sycamore are located in counties that are traditionally conservative areas of the state, a position that means that many citizens in these counties may have been in favor of restricted bargaining rights for public employees. The educators in this study, while reluctant to talk too openly about their feelings about the political situation, were experiencing a particularly stressful school year with a lot of uncertainty about the future of their careers and about education in Wisconsin. Furthermore, the state of Wisconsin was in transition to a new set of state and national curriculum standards that caused school districts to reform their curriculum on a variety of levels. These changes to the teachers' teaching context are significant and certainly impacted the participants' responses and views of this research. Although these are not the focus of this dissertation, these factors play an important role in the participants' personal and professional lives.

Summary of Articles

This dissertation consists of an introduction, three articles, and a conclusion. Chapter 2, "Professional Development in Rural Schools: A Review of the Literature," draws together literature from the fields of rural education and professional development. Because the research

about professional development in rural contexts is relatively scant, my aim in this article is to stitch together two bodies of literature in order to better understand the needs, gaps, and extant understandings about professional development as it relates to rural places and people.

Chapter 3, "Against the Grain: Narratives of Rural People and Places," explores the narratives of two teachers and their two administrators in two districts in rural northern Wisconsin. Using a lens of sociocultural theories of discourse communities and through a narrative inquiry of the participants' collective narratives, this analysis examines the participants' narratives against the backdrop of dominant narratives about rural people and places. The analysis calls for a more critical and complex representation of rural people and places, especially schools, in order to work against the dominant narratives about rurality that exist in popular imagination.

In chapter 4, "Teacher/Learner: Toward a Redefinition of Teacher Professional Development," I examine the specific professional development experiences of two teacher participants in rural schools. Using a definition of high-quality professional development that is situated, complex, and ongoing, I explore how and whether the professional development options available to teachers in rural northern Wisconsin meet these criteria, and to what extent teachers are supported or constrained in their professional development options. In doing so, I argue for a more localized understanding of what counts as professional development for teachers as well as an expanded view of potential sources of teacher learning. Chapter 5, the conclusion, states implications of this study and suggests areas for continued research in rural education.

CHAPTER TWO

Professional Development in Rural Schools: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Every school district in the nation operates with a very specific set of circumstances that affects the material realities of the people who work in them. In that way, rural school districts are no different from any others. However, in many ways, rural school districts face unique challenges that are not accounted for in the current literature about professional development. Understanding the landscape of professional development in rural school districts requires some understanding of those unique challenges. There is no shortage of research that supports the claim that teacher professional development is an integral part of a teacher's work (Borko, 2004; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Desimone, 2009; Pella, 2011). Much of the literature further contends that the most effective professional development programs and procedures are those that are deeply tied to and clearly situated within the particular work context of the teachers who engage in professional development (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Little, 1982; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Schon, 1987; Thomas, Wineburg, Grossman, Myhre, & Woolworth, 1998). On the other hand, when we consider that one-third of the public schools in the country are in rural areas and one-fifth of all public school students attend rural schools (Johnson & Strange, 2005; Provasnik, KewalRamani, McLaughlin Coleman, Gilberston, Herring, & Xie, 2007), it stands to reason that the voices of rural teachers represent a significant population of the nation's teaching force. Yet, with the focus on situated, context-dependent professional development, there is surprisingly little research on the professional development practices of teachers in rural areas (Arnold et al, 2005; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bouck, 2004). There are a number of factors that contribute to

the shortage of research about rural schools generally and professional development in rural areas in particular, but the fact remains that if researchers are in agreement that effective professional development is sensitive to and situated within particular teaching contexts, the field of rural education research requires more and deeper exploration of the constraints and affordances that place can have in teachers' professional development.

In order to work toward an understanding of the gap in rural educational and professional development research, this literature review has two related purposes. First, I identify some of the factors that contribute to the lack of research in the field. I also explore the extant literature on professional development in order to consider the ways that it intersects with the research on rural education. Secondly, throughout this review, I focus on the importance of understanding the particular ways in which place becomes a material factor for teachers who engage in professional development in rural areas. If we take seriously the need to understand professional development and learning as situated in a teacher's unique professional setting, there is much to be learned from the teachers who engage in professional development in rural schools**.** By examining the constraints and affordances that rural teachers experience, I hope to illuminate the ways that professional development can be understood in rural contexts.

Defining Rurality and Factors Affecting Rural Education Research

What it means to be a rural school has been variously defined in the literature. This is one of the problems that Coladarci (2007) points out in his call for future rural research. He says, "Differences notwithstanding, there is the recurring assertion that the purest definition of rural entails a population fewer than 2,500. This is more by default than by thought, however, for in these schemes 'the rural is what is left over after the urban has been defined' (Farmer, 1997, p. 624). As a touchstone, then, the 2,500 figure leaves much to be desired" (Coladarci, 2007, p. 2).

While a town population of 2,500 does provide a starting point, rural schools are often defined as being distant from universities or major cities (Provasnik, et al, 2007). This implies not only a geographical distance from larger cities, but also often results in an intellectual distance as universities rarely provide the means to place student teachers in rural schools or provide funding for researchers to study rural schools, as will be discussed later. Furthermore, as the U.S. Department of Education's 1994 study, "The Condition of Education in Rural Schools" shows, "There is no federal policy on rural education, and state approaches are varied where they exist at all" (Stern, 1994, p. 3). This lack of consensus about what exactly qualifies a school as rural and how exactly to direct policy to rural schools makes it difficult to distinguish between the research that is focused on rural schools and research that is focused more generally on nonmetropolitan, small, or geographically isolated schools. With many variations in what constitutes a rural school in the research, it becomes very difficult to compare studies of rural sites (Arnold, et al., 2005, p. 2). This might explain the lack of comparative research between urban or suburban and rural schools. With further research that compares rural districts to nonrural districts, a more concrete explanation of the factors that are distinct to rural schools might be more readily available.

While the lack of a clear definition of what makes a school rural makes for fuzzy boundaries when it comes to rural education research, it also points to a larger and more onerous problem. Perhaps rurality has not been clearly defined because it is not a valued area of interest in the institutions that stand to sponsor such research. Indeed, several authors point to this as a reason for the lack of research. In the preface to his edited collection, Alan DeYoung (1991) says pointedly, "One of the 'unadvertised' features of university life is that a highly structured status system exists, in which rural issues have typically been relegated to Colleges of

Agriculture, which themselves have less prestige among university colleges" (p. ix). Stern's (1994) report echoes this statement: "The variables of small scale, isolation, and sparsity of population are still not considered important by many researchers, and most studies ignore them" (Stern, 1994, p. 4). This lack of interest and value on rural schools in the literature requires a sweeping shift in the thinking toward a recentered focus on the particular needs and circumstances of rural schools. As some researchers have argued (Bouck, 2004), rural and urban schools often have much in common in terms of levels of poverty and lack of resources, but much of the current educational literature is directed at an understanding of urban school districts. However, the existing literature on rural education also asserts that there are qualities unique to rural sites that demand increased attention in the field of educational research.

Although U.S. researchers are generally not interested in rural education, many rural teachers are. This teacher knowledge, however, is also not valued highly in academia, as evidenced by the small number of journals available that publish teacher-led research in rural education (*The Rural Educator* and *The Journal of Research in Rural Education* are two notable exceptions). Similarly, relatively few books have been published that focus on the lived experiences of rural teachers. One exception is *Rural Voices: Place-Conscious Education and the Teaching of Writing* (2003), a collection of teacher-led research about the experiences of rural teachers that was funded and collected by the National Writing Project in Nebraska. This kind of research funded by the National Writing Project, the kind that allows professional educators to study and write about their own practice as a scholarly endeavor, makes available a different dimension of rural research. Insights that teachers have about their experiences and their classrooms afford scholarship that could be overlooked by researchers who stand at a distance from the classroom.

A third problem that presents a barrier to rural research is the vast difference that exists between and among rural sites. A rural school in northern Wisconsin may look nothing like a rural school in northern Wyoming. Studies that aim to characterize rural schools based on a small sample run the risk of essentializing an extremely diverse set of schools and experiences. Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean (2005) support this conclusion with their audit of rural education research funded by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). In calling for future research, this group said:

> Adding to the difficulty is the diversity of rural America, which requires studies to be conducted in a variety of settings in order to capture the nuances of rural education. At the same time, there is a need to recognize that the values found in rural America differ in important ways from those in urban and suburban areas" (p. 20).

This position echoes the idea that there are factors that make a rural school rural. Yet these factors have not been defined in much of the literature. And, because there is so much variation in the local conditions of rural schools, it becomes even more difficult to characterize the rurality of American schools.

These three considerations; a lack of a common definition of what constitutes a rural school, a devalued status in research communities, and immense variation in rural school sites; combined with the geographical distance from research universities, add to the scarcity of high-quality rural research. While the dearth of literature about rural areas presents an area of great concern for educational research generally, it presents an even greater potential for future research in rural schools.

Existing Research in Rural Education

There are few qualitative studies that focus on the experiences of teachers in rural schools. However, the qualitative studies that do exist illuminate topics of particular importance to the field of rural education research and offer new directions for future research. Of the studies in rural education that focus on the experiences of rural teachers, a few salient themes have emerged. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of these studies focus on the preparation and recruitment of rural teachers (DeYoung, 1991; Lock, 2008; Munsch & Boylan, 2008; White & Reid, 2008; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). Within this category, quite a few studies discuss methods and strategies that have been helpful in preparing preservice teachers to teach in rural areas. A second area of focus in the literature is on the lack of resources available in rural districts (Arnold et al., 2005; Bouck, 2004; Harmon, Gordanier, Henry, & George, 2007; Jimerson, 2005). In part related to the literature on the lack of resources, there are also a few studies about the effects of school consolidation on teachers, students, administrators, and rural communities (Johnson & Strange, 2009; Khattri, Riley, & Kane, 1997; Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Two areas that are specifically related to teachers' experiences are teacher isolation in rural schools and access and quality of professional development (Brashears, 2006; Fry, 2006; Harris, Holdman, Clark, & Harris, 2005; Hickey & Harris, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2005). Finally, an emerging area of study is about the actual lived experiences of rural teachers (D'Amico & Nelson, 2000; Huysman, 2008; MacLure, 1993). Studies in this category focus on teacher identity, characteristics that are unique to teaching in rural school settings, and teachers' self-studies of the benefits and drawbacks inherent in teaching in rural areas. It is worth pointing out, however, that these themes have emerged from a very small field of literature. The studies that have been conducted, especially qualitative studies, are generally small-scale and not widely read or cited. A closer look at these studies shows the direction of current research in the field.

Problems of Rurality

Despite (or perhaps, because of) the lack of high-quality studies about rural education (Arnold, et al., 2005), much of the existing literature focuses on the challenges that rural schools face. In fact, much of the literature, both quantitative and qualitative, seems to be aimed at mediating the difficulties of rural schools (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Bouck, 2004; DeYoung, 1991; Jimerson, 2005; Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Thus, an understanding of some of the unique issues that rural schools face is necessary to understanding the more in-depth research that follows.

Lack of Resources

Rural schools face challenges that researchers contend are unique to rural schools. Bouck (2004) argues in her comparative study of urban and rural school literature that "while socioeconomic status plays an important role, when controlling for that, the [rural] setting had significant effects. These researchers found that students from small schools are offered fewer educational opportunities than students in larger schools" (p. 39). Bouck's (2004) study draws on previously completed studies to support her claims, but these ideas are also found elsewhere in the literature. For example, Jimerson's (2005) brief, "Special Challenges of the 'No Child Left Behind' Act for Rural Schools and Districts," points out that rural districts do not have the staff available to offer a wide variety of content classes because often there is a single teacher for the entire content-area department (p. 3). Harris (2001), in her study of 20 beginning teachers in rural North Dakota reported that, "Among the stressors perceived by the Prairie Teachers were being hired late, being reduced in force, having a less than full time contract, and changing assignments from year to year" (p. 23). Harris (2001) also reported that there was an attrition rate of 22% after the first year of teaching among her participants (p. 20). These pressures are

not unique to rural settings. However, the effects of these challenges on rural teacher retention rates are staggering. This can be seen in one of the few comparative studies of rural and nonrural districts. Robinson, Blaine, & Pace (2004) found that the lack of resources in rural schools present more pressing concerns than a similar lack in larger schools. They said:

> Shrinking budgets, decreasing student populations, attracting and retaining quality teachers, and addressing the problems of our culture and society with limited community resources are real problems facing the Iowa rural schools. While the schools in the Claremont [nonrural school] study hope for change that might address the issues they are facing, the rural schools in the Iowa study hope that the changes that they may be forced to deal with in the future will not undermine the education system that they have and that so many other parts of the country can only dream about (Robinson, Blaine, & Pace, 2004, p. 4).

This conclusion shows that while the rural schools in this study do face challenges that other nonrural schools also face, the stakes of these challenges are often much higher in rural schools because of the central role schools often play in these small communities. Furthermore, the benefits of rural schools (close-knit relationships, safety, individual attention, and stronger connections with parents, for examples) are much more difficult to achieve in larger schools. The threat to rural schools because of their unique challenges could eliminate educational opportunities that are valuable to students and education more generally.

School Consolidation

Another problem that affects rural schools on a far more regular basis than it does urban or suburban schools is the issue of consolidation. Jimerson (2005) says, "For small districts and schools, failure to meet AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by the "No Child Left

Behind" act] will become fodder for those policy-makers who are pushing for consolidation. Though consolidation is frequently cited as a method to reducing costs, lower academic achievement may be used to justify closing small rural schools" (p. 4). While urban and suburban schools may consolidate, rarely in urban and suburban settings does consolidation mean that an entire city or town loses its center as it does for rural schools. Indeed, Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel's (2010) phenomenological study of teachers, students, and administrators in rural districts in the process of consolidation shows that consolidation negatively impacts teachers and the positive school relationships they had before the consolidation (p. 14). Nitta et al. found that consolidation resulted in larger class sizes, more distant student-adult relationships, and negative feelings between teachers (2010). One teacher in the study who had to leave her home school and move to the receiving consolidation school equated her grief at leaving her school to the death of her mother (Nitta et al., 2010, p. 10). While the current literature in educational research doesn't offer much in the way of solutions to the problem of consolidation in rural schools, perhaps literature in areas such as school finance and policy might offer more information about this topic. However, the existing educational literature seems to characterize consolidation as negatively impacting rural schools in particular.

Teacher and Geographic Isolation

Finally, there are myriad problems associated with small schools that are assumed factors of what it means to be a rural school district. In a focus-group study of teachers in rural Florida, Huysman (2008) found that "Conditions traditionally associated with rural schools such as isolation, limited services, low socioeconomic status of students, and limited resources were considered as acceptable trade-offs for their perceived advantages of living in a rural area" (p. 35). While much of the research refers to problems such as these, there are few studies that

provide empirical data that these are problems specific to rural contexts. Rather, researchers and the general population take for granted that teaching in a rural school district means that teachers will be isolated, will have few resources, and will teach students who live in poverty. On the other hand, Huysman's (2008) study also points out the fact that many rural teachers see these inherent problems as manageable when compared with the benefits they receive from teaching in rural schools. Although the quantitative data seems to focus on the problems that come along with teaching in rural schools, much of the qualitative data shows the benefits and positive aspects of rural education.

Benefits of Rurality

With all of the attention focused on improving the condition of rural schools, it's surprising that there aren't more studies that show the benefits of teaching and learning in rural schools. One of the most studied and celebrated aspects of rural education, however, is the great benefit provided to teachers, students, and community members as a result of the centrality of the school in rural communities. Community members and parents are often actively involved in the health and maintenance of the school, partly because it is so often a large source of employment in rural communities. But, as Stern (1994) points out, rural schools are more than just a place of employment; they often represent the heart of a community: "The local school's influence has been pervasive, often determining the vitality and character of a locality. For example, the school's athletic team and cultural activities create a gauge by which community comparisons are made (and often rivalries born). When the athletic team wins, the whole community wins" (p. 21).

In a case study of high-needs, high-performing rural schools funded by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning [McREL] group, Barley & Beesley (2007) found that

teachers, students, students and administrators in four different districts commented on the benefits of rural schools and their importance to rural communities:

> Reviewing common themes across all four schools revealed that each has a close and mutually-supportive relationship with the community. In each case, people commented, "The school is the community." Community members and school personnel share the perception that if the school were closed, the community would essentially cease to exist. The school is a point of pride, a social and events center, a source of help provided by teachers and students, and a building used by many other groups. In return, the community provides financial, volunteer, and moral support (Barley & Beesley, 2007, p. 9).

The centrality of the school in rural communities is a common theme in the literature. In D'Amico & Nelson's (2000) study of exemplary schools in the upper Midwest, they found that because of the centrality of the school, teachers and other school people were able to rally the support of the community in the implementation of new initiatives. "The school people were emphatic that being members of their rural community was a great advantage for facilitating their aggressive efforts to build community support and buy-in [of new school initiatives]" (D'Amico & Nelson, 2000, p. 186). Thus, having the support of the community creates a mutually beneficial partnership and increased communication between the school and community.

Robinson, Blaine, & Pace (2004) showed that a general feeling of contentment was seen in the rural schools that was not present in nonrural schools. Students in the study were aware of the benefits of having more individualized attention than they might receive in a larger school and enjoyed a high participation level in extracurricular activities. Teachers, too, were glad of

the small class sizes and the opportunity to teach a variety of classes, although this is sometimes seen as one of the drawbacks of teaching in a rural school (see Jimerson, 2005; Robinson, Blaine, & Pace, 2004, p. 2). Among other benefits of rural communities, "Study participants indicated that security, activity, social service, variety, and ability utilization were the intrinsic factors ranked highest in contributing to job satisfaction" (Huysman, 2008, p. 35). Certainly these are important benefits of rural schools for all people involved in rural education, and further research might illuminate some of these benefits for future rural teachers.

Studies of Teacher Identity and the Experiences of Rural Teachers

The theme of teacher identity in rural schools is perhaps one of the most authentic ways to study the benefits and challenges of what it means to be a rural teacher. Because teaching practice is a highly individualized endeavor, researchers might use these studies to begin to piece together how the challenges and benefits of teaching in a rural setting are borne out in practice. Wenger & Dinsmore (2005) point out that, "More research is needed to tell the stories of how teachers meet diverse students' needs while attempting to make the connection between pedagogy/curriculum and the value of place in rural communities" (p. 12). But the value of teachers' stories is not just relevant to the ways that teachers meet students' needs. The intersection of teacher identity and rural settings might shed light on why teachers choose to teach in rural areas. This insight could provide some much-needed depth to the reasons underlying rural schools' difficulty in retaining teachers. As Hare (1991) says, "Once we begin to identify our existing teachers and their motivations, we may more effectively recruit those teachers we want and need. When we understand, for example, that many of our teachers were also our students and we understand why they now teach for us, we can begin to identify those students we want teaching for us in the future" (Hare, 1991, p. 153). Consequently, further study

into the area of rural teacher identity, specifically through teacher narrative, offers a promising direction for future research.

One such study is Clandinin & Connelly's (1996) narrative inquiry of teachers' secret, sacred, and cover stories. Although this study did not take place in a rural context, it is an important illustration of the ways that teachers' identities can be narrated through stories of their experiences. In fact, Clandinin & Connelly (1996) urge educational researchers to seek out teachers' stories as a way of understanding their experiences:

> We believe that an understanding of teachers' personal practical knowledge, set in the context of teachers' professional knowledge landscapes, points in a different direction. We need new questions. Better yet, we need new ways of relating to professional life in schools out of which productive researchable questions might emerge (Clandinin & Conelly, 1996, p. 29).

There are few existing studies of rural teachers' narratives beyond historical documents of one-room schoolhouses. Burton & Johnson's (2010) portraiture study of two novice teachers in the rural South, however, offers new insight into the ways that rural teachers define themselves. The study focuses on the inseparability of the teachers' personal and professional identities. Using a combination of field notes, life history interviews, and contextual information that helped to create a picture of the setting, Burton & Johnson (2010) examined the preparation and decisions that led the teachers to choose rural school districts and the experiences they had during their first years. Each of these teachers chose to teach in small, rural communities because the communities were similar to the ones in which they had grown up. The differences in the two teachers' experiences, though, make a strong argument for the importance of community connection in rural schools that is supported by other rural education research.

Melissa, who took a position in the community where she had grown up, was immediately accepted and welcomed into her new role as a teacher. Emily, on the other hand, took a position in a community like her hometown, but felt isolated because she was an outsider to the community. Once she became more involved with personal networks and events in the community, though, she began to feel more accepted. Burton & Johnson describe the experiences of the two young teachers as "synergistic":

> By synergy we mean that within Emily and Melissa's lives, identity and relationships work together to influence why they want to continue teaching in rural communities….It is the synergy between identity and relationships—the way they work together—that has attracted and kept Emily and Melissa in rural communities (Burton & Johnson, 2010, p. 12).

This study reinforces the idea that rural teachers become and remain rural teachers because of a connection to the communities in which they teach. They must develop not only a teacher identity in the school, but a personal identity within and as part of the community. This idea is echoed in Robinson, Blaine, & Pace's (2004) comparative study. In these interviews with teachers and students in three rural schools in Iowa, many participants mentioned the importance and positive impact of the relationships built within the school. This is contrasted with a similar study performed with teachers and students in large urban and suburban schools. In the urban and suburban schools, the participants also emphasized the importance of school relationships, but said that the relationships were generally negative and, "The large size and the wide diversity of the student populations were seen as contributing to the weak relationships that existed between the teachers and the students and between students" (Robinson, Blaine, & Pace, 2004, p.

3). Although this study didn't focus on teacher identity, it reinforces the findings of Burton & Johnson's (2010) study.

While Burton and Johnson's study suggests that rural teachers develop their identities partly from their own rural background, Swidler's (2005) narrative study of the last of Nebraska's one-teacher schools highlights the experiences of a teacher, Will, who did not grow up in a rural area. "Culturally and educationally, Will's experience is removed from rural Nebraska, the Upper Rill community, and one-room schooling. As he says, 'There is nothing rural about me'" (Swidler, 2005, p. 6). Yet, despite Will's lack of prior experience in a community like Upper Rill, he is highly regarded by parents and students. For example, one day the researcher observes Will scolding one of his eight students for not putting in enough effort. Swidler reflects that this scene seems harsh to an outsider, but then reflects:

> This small event reveals a deeper aspect of the school, sense of attachment and obligation the teacher and students have toward one another, specifically the rights and role of the teacher at Upper Rill. This reflects part of the students' shared understanding—a kind of unstated social contract—that Will has a right to push students because he cares about them and, in the end, because he is 'nice.' This is induced largely by the small setting, where the teacher and students are together almost constantly (Swidler, 2005, p. 6).

From this narrative look into the life of a teacher in a small, rural school, we can begin to see some of the characteristics that define rural teachers.

In addition to exposing the lived experiences of rural teachers, qualitative studies that specifically focus on how rural teachers see themselves and what they see as their connections to their rural teaching positions might offer insight into how rural education differs from nonrural settings. Studies that seek to compare rural and nonrural experiences of teachers are also quite

rare, but the findings can be influential for future research. Coladarci (2007) supports this conclusion: "Insofar as rural particularity is often presumed (if not explicitly stated) by qualitative rural education researchers, the multi-site design strategy for making the rural argument at least should be considered" (p. 5). However, this approach is particularly difficult because of the uniqueness of each individual teacher and her experiences. Generalizing about rural education based on individual case studies creates the risk of essentializing the rural experience. MacLure's (1993) study comparing the identities of teachers in three distinct geographical locations in England (rural, suburban, and urban) pointed out this difficulty: "Although such gross characteristics of context provided boundaries and constraints, they were not predictive in any simple way of individual teachers' attitudes, expectations or practice. It did not prove possible to delineate the characteristics (far less the 'character') of the 'rural teacher' *vis-á-vis* the 'Northerner' or the 'suburbanite'" (p. 314). While it would be very difficult to pinpoint the exact characteristics that make a teacher an ideal candidate for a rural teaching position, the troubling lack of rural teacher narratives leaves a large gap in educational research. Seeking out such narratives in future research might provide a starting point for further understanding of what it means to be a rural teacher and for valuing the highly-contextualized and specialized knowledge that teachers have of their students and teaching positions.

Professional Development and Teacher Learning

With an understanding of some of the trends in the extant literature about rural schools, I turn now to a review of the literature about professional development and teacher learning. Much of this literature is gathered from studies of nonrural contexts because it is much more robust than the rural professional development literature.

The literature on teachers' professional development has shifted considerably in recent years away from a focus on the traditional professional development workshops toward a more organic approach to teacher learning. Whereas older literature examined professional development as one-time program or experience provided by a facilitator from outside the district with a purpose of changing teachers, more recent literature frames teachers as active learners and participants in professional development programs or experiences that arise from within the district, school, or individual classroom (Borko, 2004; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008). This change is a significant one because it denotes a shift from seeing professional development as the prerogative of knowledgeable outsiders toward a view of teachers as professionals in charge of their own development and learning. Clarke & Hollingsworth (2002) note, "The key shift is one of agency: from programs that change teachers to teachers as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in professional development programs and in practice" (p. 948). This view of professional development is now widely accepted and acknowledged as the way that teachers learn in their profession.

Besides this general shift in the literature toward professional development as teacher-centered, there are a number of educational researchers that contend that the literature shows a common understanding of what effective professional development entails (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Desimone, 2009; Garet et al., 2001; Little, 1982; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wayne et al., 2008; Wilson & Berne, 1999). In their review of teacher professional development literature, Wilson & Berne (1999) synthesize the common themes and contend that effective professional development consists of a community of teacher learners, active learning on the part of the participants, ample time for teacher interaction, an acknowledgement that teacher learning is

fluid and constantly changing as a result of the professional development, and teacher learning must be linked to student achievement (p. 194-196). Similarly, Garet et al. (2001) identify three core features of professional development that have positive effects on teachers' self-reported knowledge and three structural conditions that facilitate these increases in learning. The features are professional development that is focused on teachers' content, active learning on the part of the participants, and coherence between the professional development activities and the teachers' individual needs and experiences. The three structures that are conducive to these features are "reform activities" that allow teachers to direct the form and content of their learning, collective participation from teachers who are in similar spaces or situations, and extended study that allows for a careful process of implementation and reflection (Garet et al, 2001, p. 916).

While there is much agreement that there are certain factors that are important to the overall effectiveness of professional development for individual teachers, many researchers choose to foreground certain factors and argue for a continued focus on one aspect or another. For example, some researchers focus on the importance of the context in which teacher learning takes place (Little, 1982; Thomas et al., 1998). Little (1982), in her influential study of the school as a workplace, found that professional development is most impacted by school environments that are supportive of and conducive to teacher discussion and sharing. She says, "Staff development appears to have greatest prospects for influence where there is a prevailing norm of collegiality" (Little, 1982, p. 339). Thomas, Wineburg, Grossman, Myhre, & Woolworth (1998) assert that the most effective professional development occurs in collaborations within teaching departments. Because of the perceived similarities in teaching situations in terms of content and pedagogical focus, the authors argue that teachers who share a department can share their various kinds of expertise about content, pedagogy, student growth

and development, and other individual strengths; "By drawing on each individual's private understandings, which represent these different degrees of pedagogical and disciplinary expertise, the collective understanding of the group is thus advanced" (Wineburg et al., 1998, p. 23).

Other educational researchers argue that the most important aspect of teacher professional development is the process of discovery that teachers use to change their understandings of their practice (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Schon, 1987). Building on his theory of the reflective practitioner, Schon (1987) examines how coaches can support teachers to think critically using ongoing reflection. This emphasis on self-discovered, self-appropriated knowledge in and for practice has been influential to many other researchers who study professional development. This process is encapsulated in Darling-Hammond and Snyder's (2000) ideas about assessing teaching in context. Though they focus on ways that administrators can authentically evaluate teacher learning, their evaluation system has implications for the design of teacher learning. Like Schon, Darling-Hammond and Snyder incorporate processes of critical reflection using case studies, portfolios of learning, teacher inquiries, and exhibitions of teaching practice in order to assess teacher learning (p. 527-528). By shaping opportunities for teacher learning in this way, Darling-Hammond & Snyder (2000) acknowledge the complexity of thinking involved in teaching and the need for time and space to critically reflect on multiple illustrations of that complexity.

Darling-Hammond & Snyder (2000) are not the only researchers to focus on the complexity of teaching. However, whereas many researchers see this as a need for more complex ways of thinking about teacher learning, some researchers see this as a need for a

shared knowledge base that could provide structure and depth to further study of teacher learning (Desimone, 2009; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Through a review of professional development literature, Wilson & Berne (1999) conclude, "The future of good research on teacher learning of professional knowledge lies in our ability to weave together ideas of teacher learning, professional development, teacher knowledge, and student learning-fields that have largely operated independent of one another" (p. 204). Using as a starting point the common elements that exist in the literature about effective professional development, the authors call for more stringent classification and quantification of what exactly teachers learn from engaging in professional development. Desimone (2009) also argues for a more positivistic model and collective knowledge base to determine the effectiveness of professional development. While carefully avoiding an argument that simplifies the myriad tasks and demands of teaching, Desimone calls for advancement in the field of professional development research toward a more empirical assessment of teacher learning:

> Likely the ideas of multiple frameworks and ways of knowing, of complexity and the ambiguity of truth, are in tension with the empirical positivist view of research to find and test specific hypotheses. It is my hope that we can bridge the literature that privileges context and multiplicity over causal links, with the positivist policy evaluation literature, which privileges causal modeling over understanding how and why effects might occur. Both are critical to research and to policy. I offer the framework as a common base to allow our building on knowledge from both perspectives. (Desimone, 2009, p. 187).

Certainly, there is tension here. Although nearly every piece of research confirms that teaching and teacher learning are complex and varied tasks, Desimone (2009) and Wilson & Berne (1999)

call for a simplification of the factors affecting teacher learning in order to better understand the field as a whole.

Perhaps one of the most common and influential themes of the professional development literature is the contention that professional development is a situated and sociocultural endeavor (Borko, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Pella, 2011; Putnam & Borko, 2000). Perhaps one of the most influential theories of learning in general has been Lave & Wenger's (1991) theories of communities of practice. By examining how people engage in "legitimate peripheral participation" to increase their knowledge of new practices, Lave & Wenger provided examples from a variety of learning situations to illustrate that learning is indeed situated in practice. However, in communities of practice, it is not only learners who change and learning is not an individual act or process. As participants learn, the context is undeniably changed, which further changes the learning shared by the participants:

> Learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and… the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a community. "Legitimate peripheral participation" provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice. This social process, includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29).

Learning and the learner are constantly evolving in the shared experience.

This view of learning as situated within mutually beneficial systems of participants and experiences has influenced much of the literature on teacher professional development. With clear connections to Lave & Wenger's (1991) theories, Borko (2004) and Putnam & Borko (2000) contend that the physical and social contexts are integral parts of the learning activity for teachers. Thus, learning occurs everywhere in a teacher's profession (Borko, 2004, p. 4), and to understand the nature of teacher learning about their practice, it is necessary to seek out a deeper understanding of the relationship "between the knower and the known" (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 12). With these perspectives of teacher learning as situative and complex, Opfer & Pedder (2011) and Pella (2011) call for conceptualizations of teacher professional development to be equally complex and situated in particular learning contexts. Unlike Wilson & Berne (1999) and Desimone (2009) who argue for a defined teacher knowledge base with which to assess the outcomes of teacher professional development, Opfer & Pedder (2011) and Pella (2011) argue that professional development research will be necessarily complex and situative too. Although there are elements of professional development that many educational researchers agree upon to be effective for teacher learning, Opfer & Pedder (2011) point out that the existence of these particular features does not necessarily mean that teachers will learn, nor does the absence of these features ensure the absence of teacher learning (p. 377). Thus, they argue, "From a complexity thinking perspective, the methodological emphasis of investigation is placed on the exploration of patterned behavior arising from agents interacting locally according to their own principles, beliefs, and interests, in the absence of an overall blueprint or organizational master plan (p. 396). Similarly, Pella (2011) says, "More research on teachers' situated engagements as they construct knowledge for teaching is needed in order to illustrate the ways that professional

learning communities can meet the learning needs of teachers so that teachers can meet the learning needs of their students" (p. 123).

Professional Development in Rural Schools

The recent focus on professional development as situated and integrally related to teachers' particular contexts provides a strong justification for further research about the ways that teachers in rural school districts engage with professional development. In the rural education research, one of the solutions that is most often explored as a way to alleviate problems of teacher retention and isolation in rural schools is professional development. By synthesizing these two bodies of research, the field stands to gain important insights for both professional development and rural teachers. Although the research on professional development in rural schools is thin as yet, the existing studies provide important pathways for future research.

In Howley & Howley's (2005) "Rural Research Brief" in *The Rural Educator*, they argue:

> Because of the salience of context to learning ('situated learning'), the cultural meanings that pervade everyday life in rural places have relevance for the development of rural teachers….These meanings include (a) attachment to place; (b) strong commitment to community well-being; (c) connection to outdoor pursuits and the natural environment; and (d) concern for the long-term endurance and stability of life-in-place (Howley, C.B., 1997). (p. 3)

With this argument in mind, several studies that focus on the professional development of rural teachers show that the most successful programs are those that engage these cultural meanings that are particular to rural places. Hickey & Harris (2005), for example, found that teachers in

rural schools felt they benefited greatly from professional development led by fellow teachers from the district. Participants cited "increased collaboration, teamwork, and teacher leadership" as benefits of this home-grown professional development (p. 12). Because teacher leaders were able to draw on the particular contexts of the rural schools, the professional development was more meaningful and valuable to participating teachers (Hickey & Harris, 2005, p. 15). This conclusion is also shown in Blum, Yocom, Trent, and McLaughlin's (2005) study of teachers who created their own professional development studies and carried them out in collaboration with other teachers in the district. In a study of rural Kentucky teachers who were implementing a new state-wide program to increase writing test scores, Brashears (2006) found that teachers who engaged in professional development related to the new program had higher expectations for their students. "By actively choosing to embrace KERA mandates, they grew as professionals in the area of teaching writing and ultimately impacted their own student success" (Brashears, 2006, p. 26). These studies show that in districts that may not have access to professional development resources, situated and valuable professional development is still seen as beneficial to the teachers. Though more research is needed, perhaps situated, context-specific professional development like the examples cited in these studies is one step toward an increased understanding of the ways that teachers in rural school district engage with professional learning.

CHAPTER THREE

Against the Grain: Narratives of Rural People and Places

Introduction

When Samuel Bruce[3] was looking for his first job as a business education teacher over 30 years ago, he was offered positions in two very different communities. Sam had to choose between Rockford, IL, a city of about 140,000 people in northern Illinois, and Hawthorn, WI, a community of about 400 people in northern Wisconsin. It wasn't an easy decision for Sam. He would have made more money in Rockford, but he described it as a "dirty, industrial town." Hawthorn, on the other hand, offered Sam the kind of community he wanted to live in. He said it was a "nice area, rural… and the people here were nice." In the end, Hawthorn won out. Samuel chose Hawthorn because he perceived the quality of life to be better, even if it meant lower pay. Samuel's decision to choose a high quality of life over higher pay represents two of the many images that rural schools evoke: rural places offer pretty communities with nice people, but they are not economically robust. Rural communities are often characterized, both to their credit and to their detriment, as being bucolic, familial, slower-paced, and, in many cases, impoverished. These visions of what it means to live and work in a rural community exist in various media and are perpetuated in popular imagination so that it becomes common sense to think of rural America as "backward, conservative, and irrelevant" (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 47).

This research explores notions of what it means to be a teacher in a rural place and how educators in two districts in northern Wisconsin uphold and subvert these notions about their work and their lives in rural schools. By examining the stories of the participants in this study, and by comparing these stories to several themes that characterize research in rural places and

[3] All names are pseudonyms.

rural schools in particular, I aim to challenge the taken-for-granted ideas about what it is like to teach in rural northern Wisconsin. This work is not meant to identify a single truth about rural schools and teachers. Indeed, rural schools are unique and varied, and to characterize rural schools as having a common set of assets, even if those characteristics are in opposition to dominant and damaging themes, is to reinscribe many of the ideas this work sets out to challenge. Rather, the purpose of this study is to add complexity to simplistic, commonly-held ideas as a way of understanding rural school contexts more deeply and in new ways.

Relevant Literature

According to Paul Theobald and Kathy Wood (2010), rural people have learned that to be rural means to be "sub-par, that the condition of living in a rural locale creates deficiencies of various kinds—an educational deficiency in particular" (p. 17). Through their historical and cultural analyses, Theobald and Wood explain that this view of rural people and places has been built up in media, popular culture, government, and dominant culture over time and through a variety of media in messages both tacit and explicity that persist today. They argue:

> When television scriptwriters came up with the idea of poking fun at rural 'hillbillies' suddenly transplanted to Beverly Hills, they were capitalizing on a cultural conception developed centuries ago. It was a virtually unquestioned part of the modern mind-set. That kind of cementing, that kind of near-total acceptance of a mere cultural conception, required reinforcement over the years. (Theobald & Wood, 2010, p. 24).

They further point out that "Anyone—not just rural dwellers themselves, but literally anyone—can poke fun at cousin-marrying hicks from the sticks" (p. 29). Thus, the vision of rural people and places as deficient in one way or another is constantly reinscribed so that being a person

from a rural place constitutes an identity that carries with it automatic and immediate characterization.

The dominant messages about rural places as backwards and slow have important and lasting impacts on people who live in rural places, especially students. In Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas's (2009) study of students who leave or stay in their rural hometowns after graduation, the authors explain that rural places are facing a difficult trend as the so-called "best and brightest" of the small communities leave their hometowns for metropolitan areas that have more to offer economically and socially. Students who excel academically and have greater access to the social and academic capital of schooling, they argue, stand a greater chance of leaving their rural areas to seek out more lucrative opportunities that are not available to them in their hometowns, creating brain drain from the rural areas. As they explain, "Headlines from both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* blame rural out-migration on 'regional competition' from 'warmer climates and hipper scenes.' This explanation suggests that the flight of young adults is a natural occurrence, an inevitable consequence of progress, and that there is little reason to worry" (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 2). With this characterization of rural places and students, it is taken as common sense that people would want to leave rural places because there is nothing to offer economically or socially. Furthermore, even as rural places are constructed as having little to offer people who stay, they are overlooked as communities in need. Carr and Kefalas (2009) point out:

> The national debates about failing communities and economic downturns make it sound as if only cities are vulnerable. Politicians shout *over* the rural crisis in the culture wars: either there's the rhetoric about the "real" and patriotic small-town America or a

> blaming-the-victim discussion ensues about bitter, close-minded and racist rural America. (p. 24)

This dichotomy points to another view of rural places that is equally problematic: rural places are homes to simple, beautiful, and more ideal ways of life. Rural places are held up by some as the carefully manicured and cultivated towns that provide equal opportunities for all to succeed and live harmoniously. Often, this view carries with it the tacit assumption that rural places are devoid of both people of color and the problems of urban areas (two identities that also battle the dominant narratives that plague them). In this way, rurality is equated with whiteness and privilege. This view, too, belies the complexities of rural places.

As Lachuk, Burton, and Brown (2012) found in their review of literature about rural teachers, rural teachers are characterized often "as the antagonists in the stories being told about them" or as overly romanticized players in idyllic rural school settings (p. 10). The authors further point out that neither of these storylines "capture the complexities of rural teachers and their practices" (p. 10). Thus, the stories being told about rural teachers and rural places in educational research literature simplify or collapse the intricacies of the people and places, creating a narrative that does little to combat the dominant themes about rural places found in media and popular imagination. This study seeks to combat the constructions of rural identity in popular imagination that ascribes particular ideologies, behaviors, and values to rural communities and people.

Conceptual Framework

Each community is made up of individuals who live in unique discourse communities. That is to say in this study, the way that individual community members, teachers, students, parents, and administrators discuss and construct their communities is unique and determined

within what Gee (2011) calls "figured worlds" (p. 43). "A figured world is a picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal. What is taken to be typical or normal, of course, varies by context and by people's sociocultural affiliations" (p. 42). Gee's conception of figured worlds provides a useful context for understanding individuals' narratives of their lives and experiences. As participants describe themselves as part of a particular community (in this case, school communities), they "use language, but [they] also use distinctive ways of acting, interacting with others, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various sorts of objects and tools in various sorts of distinctive environments" (Gee, 2011, p. 37). Through their stories of themselves and interactions within their communities, participants construct narratives of themselves as social actors within particular contexts. Narratives, then, are the vehicles by which participants describe and understand their worlds. More than just neutral stories of a person's experiences, Goodson (1995) explains that "Storying, therefore, becomes a form of social and political prioritizing, a particular way of telling stories that in its way privileges some story lines and silences others" (p. 94). The stories that the participants in this study tell are ones that provide particular points of understanding about how each individual perceives his or her figured world and how those stories contribute to the figured worlds of these particular contexts.

In addition to being political, narratives are also inherently social, not simply through the shared act of storytelling and listening, but also through the community that is invoked within individual narratives. Carr (2001) explains, "A community exists where a narrative account exists of a *we* which persists through its experiences and actions. Such an account exists when it gets articulated or formulated—perhaps by only one or a few of the group's members—by reference to the *we* and is accepted or subscribed to by others" (italics in original, p. 22). Through the participants' stories, then, individuals narrate the collective "we" in a way that

connects the social and the political of particular contexts. This study seeks out the individual narratives as a way to understand the "we" of unique rural contexts.

More than just connecting political and social meanings that the participants narrate about their communities, this study is situated at the nexus of three aspects of the participants' identities. The participants in this study described themselves as educators in rural schools, and that frame of rurality affects their professional lives, their personal lives, and their lives within a community of rural people. Read against the backdrop of dominant narratives about rural people, the participants also narrated themselves in opposition to and in concert with constructions of rural people in popular media and educational research. The participants in this study are members of several communities of "we." While all teachers teach within particular contexts that affect (and are affected by) their professional lives, their personal lives, and their community lives, the narratives that the participants in this study describe evoke a singular fluidity between professional selves, rural selves, and community selves.

Methods and Data

In order to analyze the narratives of the participants in these two communities, I collected data from a variety of sources. The data for this study comes mainly from interview data with five participants, fieldnotes from my observations and interactions with the participants, and documents related to the particular school contexts and the local community contexts. Over the course of several months in the spring and summer of 2012, I interviewed two teachers, Sandy Hernandez and Samuel Bruce, and their district administrators, John Petrachek and Ginny Duvall, in two school districts, Sycamore and Hawthorn. I also interviewed one Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) professional, Heidi Teasdale, who works with teachers and administrators in a number of school districts in northern Wisconsin. The interviews lasted

between thirty minutes and two hours and took place at various sites of the participants' choosing. My fieldnotes recorded observational data within the schools and the communities. Because this data comes from a larger study about the intersections of rurality and professional development, much of the document data is related to teachers' professional development regulations. However, I also analyzed documents that represented the villages in this study such as websites, newspapers, and school newsletters.

After transcribing all audio- and video-recorded data, I used the qualitative research software NVivo to analyze the data. I first examined the participants' narratives of their conceptions of rurality as they related to their teaching contexts. From those narratives, I developed a set of codes that described the participants' experiences. These codes were collapsed into categories that describe themes that the participants used to narrate their lives and work in their rural contexts.

One way to represent these intersections and illustrate the complexity of the participants' lives in these rural places is through narrative inquiry. According to Polkinghorne (1995), "Narrative is the linguistic form uniquely suited for displaying human existence as situated action" (p. 5). As participants described their experiences, I saw these narratives as both personal and collective. These stories narrated individuals' lives within a context of other individuals' lives. And, as the participants narrated stories about their experiences as rural educators, they were also invoking the stories that have been told about them as people in rural places. Because of this, narrative inquiry provided a way to explore the complexity that exists within and among participants' stories. With a focus on the context for these educators' stories, I wanted to "look for the patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across individuals' personal experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 423). Three themes arose: (1) belonging

(teachers' and community members' fitness to live and work in rural places); (2) colleagues as family (systems of support for one another as colleagues); and (3) the school/community network (interactions between the school and the community). Thus, this analysis focuses on the intersections and connections between the teachers' professional lives, personal lives, and community lives.

Hawthorn and Sycamore

On the surface, Hawthorn and Sycamore appear to have many similarities. Situated in neighboring counties in northern Wisconsin, both towns are primarily considered logging and farming communities, and both communities are in population decline as the logging industry has waned. Of those who are not loggers or farmers, many people find work in service industries such as motels and food services as both communities are considered prime locations for outdoor activities and draw many tourists throughout the year. This region of Wisconsin is dotted with small vacation homes, summer cabins, and hunting shanties, and the communities in this area rely heavily on natural phenomena for local revenue throughout the year, such as lots of snowfall, large deer and turkey populations, and warm summers that invite water recreation. Each community's school district is also a major employer for the area, making the school buildings major centerpieces in both Hawthorn and Sycamore. Racially, most residents of Hawthorn and Sycamore identify as White (86% and 97%, respectively), with American Indian and Black comprising the rest of the populations. Similar demographics are reflected in the schools. One striking difference between Sycamore and Hawthorn is each community's rate of poverty. The median household income for Sycamore is approximately $32,000 with approximately 18% categorized as living below the poverty level. In Hawthorn, the median household income is about $12,000 and 55% of the population is considered to be below the

poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Interestingly, the schools have similar rates of poverty to one another with about 65% of each school population considered economically disadvantaged (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2012). Because both school districts draw students from a number of small communities and villages, the demographics of the schools do not always mirror the demographics of the communities in which they are situated. Given the number of similarities in demographic data between these two communities, it is not hard to see how they can be lumped together as representing a certain kind of poor, rural community. However, it is important to remember that communities are made up of individuals who interact within unique (and, in this case, smaller) discourse communities.

With these understandings of the two focal communities, I turn now to a discussion of some of the ways that the participants in these communities characterized their lives professionally and personally. The overlapping and intersecting manner of the stories about their personal and professional lives within these rural communities illustrates some of the complexity that is hidden from more simplistic views of what it means to be a rural educator.

A Sense of Belonging

For the teacher and administrator participants in Hawthorn and Sycamore, there is a strong sense that they have chosen to live and work in their respective communities because they belong there. This sense of belonging comes mainly from having family connections or family history in the community. For John Petrachek, administrator of Sycamore, he belongs in Sycamore because he has long-standing roots in the community. He explained, “Because my children’s great grandfather is buried in the local cemetery, and because I grew up on a farm 30 miles south of here, I am viewed as someone who has ‘returned’ to the northwoods.” John also noted that “seven of ten of the teachers who have been here longer than ten years have an

extended family connection to the community." Sandy Hernandez grew up in another rural town very near Sycamore and she has taught in Sycamore for the majority of her 20-year teaching career. Ginny Duvall, superintendent of the Hawthorn School District, explained that staff member retention was closely connected to having grown up in the area. She said, "Most teachers hired from out of the area leave, and those from our area stay." In Hawthorn, Samuel Bruce also recalled at least seven of his teacher colleagues who "grew up here, graduated from here, went off to college and have come back." For districts that employ only 20-25 full-time teachers, it seems significant that so many of them grew up in the area and have chosen to spend their careers and lives in the places that they have called home for most of their lives.

Beyond family ties, the participants in this study describe a community that is welcoming and friendly. The residents of the community are interested in knowing each other and about one another's lives. They belong in these communities because people know them and people in the communities look out for one another. Samuel describes his first year in Sycamore: "Everybody here knew me and talked to me. Everybody was real friendly. As far as finding out how you are, what you're doing. That's one really nice thing about a small area like this." Sam's appreciation of the personal connection evokes images of friendly small towns where people know one another by name. He sees this as one of the benefits that outweighs other amenities a place might offer, as illustrated by his decision to choose Hawthorn over Rockford in his job hunt many years ago.

Yet Samuel and many others describe this sense of belonging in a rural community as a trade-off for amenities that are simply not available in these small, working-class areas of the state. In fact, though Sam has worked in the Hawthorn district for over 30 years, his own children went to school in another district because it offered some opportunities that were not

available in Hawthorn. He explained, “You know, I’ve taught here, coached here, down a lot of things here that have been really good experiences, but I think they’ve [his children] gotten a really good education at [Hickory]. [Hickory] has a pool, they’ve got a few other things going. There are bowling alleys there; you’ve got a theater. A number of minor things.” The implication in this narrative is that, while Hawthorn offers a wonderful sense of community to its residents, other communities have more to offer in terms of recreation and amenities. Those who choose to live in Hawthorn have to make the decision to live in a community that has little to offer them in terms of businesses, recreation, and work opportunities. This adds to the sense of belonging to this community because there is also a sense that to be rural, you have to be a certain kind of person who values personal relationships and a friendly atmosphere over the big-city amenities. In very real terms, neither Hawthorn nor Sycamore has a place where residents can buy socks, and Sycamore is ten miles from the nearest grocery store, a significant distance given that many people live well past the town limits. So there are definitely trade-offs that residents make in choosing to live and work in these rural places.

Furthermore, in a town with less than 500 residents, there is little anonymity. While the participants in my study experience this lack of anonymity as a friendly, welcoming community where they feel a sense of belonging, certainly this can feel unnerving to newcomers in the community. In fact, it didn’t take long for people to notice my presence as an outsider in Hawthorn. I remember sitting in the school district office waiting for a meeting with the superintendent when a high school student came in and plopped down near me after talking briefly with the secretary. He asked who I was, and I explained that I was a researcher from Madison and I was waiting to meet with the superintendent. He then said, “Oh, is that your blue Corolla in the parking lot?” Surprised, I told him it was and asked him how he knew. He said

with a smile, “There aren’t that many cars out there.” Even though I grew up in northern Wisconsin, I felt a similar sense of being an outsider when I stopped for ice cream at a tiny ice cream and gift shop in Sycamore. As I perused the ice cream selection, the woman behind the cash register and a young woman who looked like her daughter looked me over. It wasn’t more than 30 seconds that I was in the store before they said, “Where you from?” I explained that I am from Madison and I was in town researching the school. The older woman asked why I was researching a school “all the way up here.” I told them I grew up in Pine, which is about half an hour south of Sycamore. Both women said, “Oh!” at the same time and the younger woman said, “What do you want to know? I can tell you anything you want to know about the school.” So we chatted for a little while I ate my mint chip. They shared that they feel very lucky to have grown up in an area that offers so much individual attention and support for students, and they assured me that Sycamore is a wonderful place to live and work. Having established the fact that I belonged in this part of the world, the women were more willing to share “insider” information with me that revealed just how wonderful the community is.

While my research reinforced this image of rural northern Wisconsin as being friendly and welcoming in my mind, it is not lost on me that I was welcome, in part, because I fit the mold of what residents from these small communities look like. As a white woman, especially as one who invoked her hometown frequently in these conversations, I displayed a sense of belonging in that area of the state quite readily. Those who cannot so readily invoke a sense of belonging, however, certainly experience rural places very differently. With the lack of anonymity, it is not hard to imagine that people who would prefer more privacy have a more difficult time. Sam tuned in to these competing discourses about rural towns too, particularly in relationship to school culture in his rural town. He said:

> There is bullying, and it's been here forever, since I started day one until now. There are kids that are tormented by other kids in the school. It goes on, and you try to keep it from happening, but it does. […] We have very poor people that probably get to take a bath or shower once a week if they're lucky, and we have some people who are quite affluent. They say, 'Well, you don't have those kinds of problems in your school.' Well, we do! It's just that it's smaller, and in some cases, it probably sticks out more than it does in a big school district.

It's interesting to note, here, that Samuel uses the phrase "They say…" to describe one of the many characterizations of rural people and rural schools. In referring to "them," Sam is referring to a dominant view of rural schools. More than this, Sam points to both the notion that small schools are idyllic and trouble-free and the notion that being "different" in a small school is perhaps more problematic than it might be in a larger school. Although he uses an example of class divisions as one example of the threat of bullying, certainly rural students who are stigmatized for other aspects of their identity, such as sexuality, race, and religion, experience notions of belonging in these small towns in unique ways that warrant further study.

While these narratives of belonging capture some of the complexity of what it means to be part of a rural town for the participants in this study, it is not without its problems. John Petrachek, Sandy Hernandez, Ginny Duvall, and Samuel Bruce see themselves as belonging in their communities, in part because they have familial roots in the area or because they see the benefits of a rural place as outweighing the drawbacks they describe. Yet the very notion of belonging implies that there are those who do not belong and who do not fit in the community. This invokes one of the very powerful, dominant narratives about rural people and places as being insular and suspicious of "outsiders." On the other hand, perhaps what residents see as

friendliness and genuine interest in the people who inhabit their small parts of the world is seen differently by people who don't feel the same sense of belonging. While a dominant narrative about rural people and places is that they are insular and suspicious of outsiders, people who live in rural communities are often eager to characterize their communities as having a very strong sense of connection, belonging, and acceptance. However, the truth about rural people and places is that they fall somewhere between these two narratives. To some, particularly those who have roots in the community, rural places do create a strong sense of belonging. But for others, that sense of belonging does not come so easily. Like all the narratives in this paper, rural people and places are more complex and nuanced than either of these two more simplified versions.

Colleagues as Family

Just as the sense of belonging within a rural community is complex and multi-faceted, so too is the sense of belonging as a teacher within a rural school. For teachers in these two districts, there is a concerted effort to make sure a sense of belonging permeates the school climate for teachers. And, just as there are trade-offs for people who choose to live in rural communities, so too are there trade-offs for teachers who choose to work in rural schools. Recruitment and retention of teachers are pressing issues for many rural schools, and all of the participants in this study described the difficulties of having a high rate of turnover. Samuel explained that they have a math teacher who is really good and they want to keep her. Sam thought that she would stay because she "has family that lives in the area, so she's closer to home. But I think she's out on an interview today." Even those who have roots in the communities do not necessarily stay for the entirety of their careers. Often this is due in part to the fact that Hawthorn and Sycamore do not offer many job opportunities to people who do not work in the schools or in the one or two main industries in the towns. New teachers to the districts, who are often young, single

teachers, leave when they get married and their spouse seeks employment. Thus, the staff face the prospect of turnover constantly. Rural schools have it doubly hard because it is also difficult to get qualified applicants. John put it very pointedly when he said, "I would predict that 90% of folks looking for employment will not consider us because of location and lack of access to large town amenities." Compounding the lack of employment applications to rural schools is the fact that these schools frequently hire teachers who are seeking their first jobs. This isn't necessarily a bad thing; in fact, Sandy called it an advantage in some ways because they "get a fresh perspective." However, many of the teachers who take a job in Hawthorn or Sycamore for their first year move on to other jobs after the first year, when they have gained a year of experience. Sam described how this situation has played out in Hawthorn:

> There were three years in a row that we had a new teacher, new teacher, new teacher. It was to the point where we couldn't find applicants. They found a guy down close to [Hickory] over there that wasn't even certified but knew some math, so they pulled him in for a year! They watched videos, and it was just like, 'Oh my word.' It was a full year of basically no math.

With this story, Sam described very clearly the toll that constant turnover can take on a district and its students. Although rural schools are subject to the same national standards to employ highly qualified teachers, this requirement places an inordinate burden on rural schools that already have difficulty attracting teachers to the area and experience higher than average out-migration (Eppley, 2009). Rural schools experience a difficult cycle of having few applicants, hiring a young teacher who may only stay a year (or finding an unqualified person to temporarily fill the position), and then managing the turnover as the new teacher moves on. In some ways, however, this high rate of turnover contributes to a positive working relationship between

administration and teachers. Sandy explained, "In comparison with most of the districts around here, the teachers in Sycamore have a really good working relationship with the district board…because they understand, you know, we're [one of the] lowest paid district[s] in the state already." Sam echoed this sentiment: "I think we're lucky in Hawthorn that a majority of the teachers here are pretty happy where we're at. The administration at this time is pretty cooperative." Because it's difficult to attract and retain teachers, the school boards work with teachers to support them. They know that if teachers feel they are treated badly, it will be very hard to replace the teachers who leave. Yet the challenges of frequent turnover remain, as is common in many rural schools. Difficulties with teacher recruitment, retention, and turnover in rural schools are well-documented in the literature (see, for example, DeYoung, 1991; White & Reid, 2008; Yarrow, Ballantyne, Hansford, Herschell, & Millwater, 1999). The stories of the participants in Hawthorn and Sycamore support these narratives of rural schools.

What are less often described in the literature, however, are the factors that contribute to the high rate of turnover in schools. Sandy and Samuel both described the difficulty that their school districts have in recruiting and retaining teachers as being directly connected the combination of low pay and demanding work load. Samuel explains his teaching load, "One year I'll be teaching accounting, one year I won't be. I'll be teaching personal finance just about every year. But then I might not." When I asked when he finds out what he'll be teaching each year, he said that he finds out when school starts. I expressed my amazement at the lack of time to prepare, and he explained, "The first week of school they [students] can still change their schedules, and if they all decide to change their schedules, one class that you might have planned on working on and teaching, may have all of a sudden dried up to one or two students. If it's two I usually don't do it. If I've got six or more it's usually alright. It is stressful." In rural middle

and high schools where there may only be one or two subject-area teachers for grades 6-12, teachers have many different courses to prepare and few other professionals to consult about subject-area concerns. This high number of preps, combined with the flexible schedule that Samuel described, requires teachers who are willing to make changes frequently. The idea that it takes "a special kind of person" to live in rural places and work in rural schools is one that came up more than once in my interviews with the educators in this study. In particular, Sandy described the complexity of this idea when she connected the work load of being a teacher in the Sycamore school district to the high rate of turnover they experience. She says:

> We've had, especially in the last few years, we've had a lot of turnover in certain areas. There have been people in those positions for long periods of time who, for whatever reason, whether they've retired or decided to move on or whatever, left. And since that long-term person left, there's been a lot of turnover because of monetary things mostly. Sycamore is [one of the] lowest paying district[s] in the state, so, as you can well imagine, it doesn't attract a lot of people to the positions here. […] Because for that reason, for the wage reason and also because in a small school where you are the only person in that discipline, you have a lot of preps. And it is hard! It is very hard to do! So it takes a very special person to do that. And we did have several science teachers who were only here for a year because they just couldn't keep up with the prep work.

With a large number of unique courses to teach and high school departments made up of only a few teachers, combined with the geographic isolation of these rural towns, it is not much of a surprise to learn that both Hawthorn and Sycamore have a hard time recruiting and retaining teachers.

With the constant threat of turnover in schools, it is no wonder that rural schools frequently hire teachers who have family in the area or have history there. The teachers are just more likely to stay if they feel a sense of belonging in that community. However, Sandy and Samuel both described numerous ways that teachers try to create a sense of community among colleagues. Sandy said, "The faculty here at Sycamore is remarkable in its closeness. […] It's very much like a family. So, we have always been like the charter school with students. Whatever students need, we'll figure out a way to get it for them. So teaching here is a very pleasant experience most of the time." In Sycamore, then, teachers' roles are not just defined by their ability to support students; they are also defined by their ability to support one another as colleagues. Sandy went on to say:

> We do what we can to support those [new] teachers because we all have been first-year teachers. We know what a struggle that might be and the fact that the pay is really low makes it even more difficult and people don't want to stay if they're having an unpleasant experience, and we want them to stay! So we try really hard to make it nice for them and help them along as much as we can and support them.

This family-like system of support for colleagues is a necessary response to the high rate of turnover in these schools, and, as Sandy and Samuel described, it is a welcome addition to the strong sense of community among colleagues. Teachers are able to talk with one another frequently, which provides support for them as professionals as well as a deep sense of connection to the students they teach. Both Sandy and Samuel described talking with colleagues about their lives in addition to their students. As Sandy said, they talk "not necessarily about methods or anything, but about how things are going, about the units we're on, what we're doing in class. That sort of stuff. The daily kinds of things." This sense of closeness and familial

support provides a positive counterpoint to the demanding work load and low pay that accompany a career in these two districts.

This sense of family among the staff carries over to a similar type of support for students, an advantage of a small school with a manageable number of students. When I asked Sam about the philosophy of the Hawthorn School District, he said,

> "In all reality and truth, you want the best education that you can give a student. Bottom line. You've got all those fancy words up there, fancy policy. Our school is for the children. Whatever they say. You try to get them to achieve as high and as far advanced as they can get. And that's what it's all about. You want them to learn, to love learning. If you can get that out of kids, you've got it made."

Sandy echoes these comments when she talks about the community within the Sycamore district:

> They're all our students. They're all everybody's students. And that's how everyone there feels. That's one of the things that makes that school really special. All the students we've had open enroll into our school have commented on how much like a family it is and how much the teachers really care about the students.

These two teachers take great pride in creating a sense of caring about their students, even if they don't teach those students on a daily basis. And that feeling is not lost on the students. As Samuel explains, "There's a number of them [graduating seniors] that come back. Even this year there were some that graduated last year and came back and said, 'Oh, I love this school. I'm so glad I went to school here. It was such a family'." This sense of family among colleagues and students is, for the teachers in these two districts, a necessary and welcome part of working in a rural school district. So, while it is common to think of teachers in rural areas as being professionally isolated from other teachers who teach similar grade levels or subject areas, the

teachers in this study find other ways to support one another that don't focus on shared planning about specific classroom content. Instead, the sense of family revolves around their shared commitment to students and providing a high quality education.

The School/Community Network

Just as rural places often are painted as pastoral, idyllic, peaceful, and shades of a more perfect national past, rural schools often are painted as enjoying higher than average parent and community involvement and having ample funding from a loving community willing to support the schools' every whim. This narrative serves many purposes for public and private, rural and urban interests alike. Politicians (of various political leanings) hold up this view of rural places as a goal toward which urban and suburban schools should strive. Rural mayors and townspeople use this image as a selling point for a more peaceful way of life in their towns. Educational policy analysts invoke this narrative of rural places to lend further credence to the argument that urban schools are most in need of support. Like other narratives of rural places, however, the reality of the connections between rural schools and the communities in which they are located is as complex and nuanced as the relationships between any school and its community. While the participants in this study would agree that their schools have a very visible connection with their communities, it is unlikely that they would describe this relationship as simple or uncomplicated. As the centerpieces of their communities, Sycamore and Hawthorn schools have very important roles to play. The school buildings are physical edifices of the communities' financial support as individual's taxes support the construction and maintenance of each town's most prominent building. As the largest employer in each town, many community members are extremely interested in making sure the school is well supported and efficiently run. More importantly, however, for parents the school represents a shining beacon of hope for students to find a path to

broader and more numerous opportunities than their small communities can offer. Ginny Duvall, superintendent of the Hawthorn School District explained it succinctly when she said, "We are the hub of the community. Our building is used from early morning into late evening. We are the lifeline to the future for our students and the solid rock for our community." As such, the school is very much a part of the community, and the relationship between the two is very reminiscent of family. Staff members work hard to create a sense of community and family within the school, but they must also forge similar connections beyond the school. While this is certainly not a trait unique to rural schools (urban and suburban schools also boast strong connections to their communities as a way to strengthen their schools), this connections plays another role in these small communities too. For Hawthorn and Sycamore, having a high-quality school that offers an excellent education is quite literally a community-building project. Sandy described this connection: "The school IS basically the crux of the community. I mean, the school is why the community exists, basically." The schools serve to keep people in the community, and, in turn, the community encourages graduates to return to the communities and continue to help them grow and thrive. Thus, community members have a vested interest in making sure their schools are the best they can be. In this sense, the dominant narrative that rural schools enjoy more community involvement seems to ring true for the teachers of Hawthorn and Sycamore. However, the dominant narrative overlooks the fact that this high level of involvement is a requirement for continued survival in towns that might otherwise dissolve.

Furthermore, this involvement is costly to the people of these impoverished communities. Sandy and Samuel both explained that people in the community want to give all they can in order to support their schools, but the administrations of the schools must always be mindful of the financial burden they place on the community members. Sam explained, "It's very rural; it's

difficult for the district to push initiatives very hard. This part-time retired teacher and I, we worked extremely hard with people in the community to get the [track and field] track that's out there. They wanted it; it's just that it's very hard to come up with the money." He later elaborated, "A couple of years ago is the first time we had a football team in forever. They [People in the community] want these things, they're supportive of it, but it's still really hard to actually get there. […] It's very hard for a community of this size to get a rubberized track out there, or to get a swimming pool. That wasn't even brought up. Those types of things are dreams." Members of both the community and the school district know that offering some of these school amenities draws people to the community, which supports a shared goal for the schools and the towns. Yet, the reality for many people in the community is that they cannot afford to subsidize all of the schools' initiatives. Teachers and administrators in the schools have to be creative and proactive in garnering community support and finding viable alternatives to using community members' tax dollars to build the schools and increase their offerings. As Ginny explained, "We are extremely rural and have access to few resources in our community. We work on a small budget and make efficient use of every dime." Sam also shared many examples of the work he has done to seek out and apply for grants that would improve the technology available to the school district, but there are few alternatives for other kinds of necessary funding that it takes to support the schools. Because the school is reliant on financial support from the community, it is common for community members to see the school as constantly looking for more money. This can create quite a bit of tension between the school and community as well. Sometimes this tension manifests itself in resentment for the teachers and staff of the schools. In communities such as Hawthorn, where many residents live below the poverty line, it isn't hard to see how community members would resent the steady employment

and comfortable wage the teachers and administrators earn at the school, even if those wages are some of the lowest in the state. Sam described this well when I asked him how the community thinks of the school. He said, "In general, we're overpaid and underworked. That is in general the feeling of a lot of people here. There's good people everywhere that give you support, but generally I would say they think we get too much pay. Forever, even when I first started and made $12,000 a year or less." It is important to note here that this study was conducted during a time of widespread political upheaval that saw teachers at the center of a bitter debate about salary and benefits. However, as Sam points out, this feeling of resentment has persisted in Hawthorn for the duration of his career, not just in times of political turmoil. So, even though the participants in this study describe the school and the community members as having a shared goal of supporting the school, this shared goal is constantly negotiated. As the centerpiece of their communities, these schools also attract their share of scrutiny as well as support, especially when it comes to funding and financial support.

Aside from the constant financial negotiations, community members and school staff find other ways to strengthen the school and community network. Often this support comes in the form of community presence within the schools, many of which fit the vision of rural school and community partnerships. Sandy explained, "They [Community members] come to school events and sports events and that sort of thing related to the school. A lot of the people volunteer and do different tasks around the schools. Parents come in and read to the elementary kids and work with the afterschool program." This kind of community involvement is the kind that many schools hope to have because it builds a relationship between the school and community members. However, this involvement takes on a new meaning in a rural place like Sycamore. Sports events, for example, provide entertainment for the community in the absence of other

kinds of community amenities. Community businesses provide services to maintain the school because it helps the community overall when the school building, as a very visible piece of the community, looks beautiful and well-maintained. Again, the support that the community provides is a sort of community-building project that contributes to the benefits of the town as a whole. In turn, the school strives to provide an education that the parents and students can be proud of. Community members also provide a deeper kind of support that Sandy described: "Sometimes we have community-based experts and sometimes they make phone calls or whatever we need to do to get them [the students] the information they're looking for." In this way, teachers blur the boundaries between their roles as teachers and the community members' roles as teachers. Community members are part of the education of the students. They do not see the school as having sole responsibility for students' education. Instead, they are actively involved in being resources for students to pursue new opportunities that link the school and community very closely. Sandy described a project conducted by students in the charter school that created a community history scavenger hunt. This project collected the pieces of community history and documented it. In this way, this project was not only a school project, but it was also a community-building project. For rural communities, this is an extremely important role for the school to play. It is not as if students learn and then leave; they are given opportunities to revitalize a community that has been in economic downturn for many years. The school and the community work together to support one another. Everyone in the community is responsible for educating the youth.

Conclusions

In their chapter titled "Learning to Be Rural: Identity Lessons from History, Schooling, and the U.S. Corporate Media" Paul Theobald and Kathy Wood (2010) poignantly narrate a

meeting about rural education in which a student representative said the students were "well aware that we don't have the best schools, we don't get the best teachers or the best education. We know that we're going to have to catch up when we go to college" (p. 17). This is the way that rural schools are constructed, and this is what rural students internalize from the dominant messages about rural education. This is the collective narrative that rural people tell about themselves. If we, as educational researchers and teachers, take seriously the weight of these internalized messages, it is crucial that more research take on the task of painting a more complex picture of what it means to be rural.

Through interviews with the participants in this study, I sought to add complexity to the dominant narratives about rural schools and teachers in these two communities. By examining the ways that these four educators describe their professional and personal lives in rural communities, it is possible to see a more nuanced view of what it means to live and work in rural places. In addition to illustrating the lives of these particular people, their stories serve to subvert, and in some ways uphold, the messages that dominate popular imagination about rural places. This analysis is not meant only to tell a counterstory about rural people, however. This work has very real implications for educational policy, current and future teachers in rural places, and rural people themselves. Most importantly, this research urges a realization of the ways that rural people and places are perpetually characterized alternately as insular, suspicious of outsiders, and lacking in diversity; or simplistic, beautiful, and home to a slower pace of life. These messages are used in different ways at different times to poke fun at people who live beyond the limits of urban and suburban areas and to further deny access to resources that would maintain these small communities. In Hawthorn and Sycamore, these messages do come across, not only in the lived experiences of the participants in this study, but also in the ways that they invoke the dominant

messages that exist to characterize their lives. Thus this work calls not just for more research about rural places and schools in particular. This research calls for a more conscious and conscientious characterization of rural people and places that works to counteract the dominant narrative.

CHAPTER FOUR

Beyond "Stacks of CEUs": Toward a Redefinition of Teacher Professional Development

It is an expectation, both tacit and overt, that good teachers constantly seek new methods and techniques to improve their teaching. The ongoing professional development of teachers is essential to their content-area expertise, pedagogical practice, flexibility, and ability to construct learning environments suitable to their teaching situation. Because professional development opportunities are seen as providing insight into new, innovative, and effective teaching strategies, these opportunities often are seen as teachers' connection to the profession through a larger network of expert teachers. Ladson-Billings and Gomez (2001), in their study of professional development and student success, conclude:

> Thus we see professional development as the linchpin of school reform aimed at raising academic performance. No amount of standards, benchmarks, and high-stakes testing can bring about school improvement without attention to teacher quality. We believe that teachers have to be active participants in their own professional development. And we cannot expect that one-shot, one size-fits-all workshops directed by "expert" consultants can produce the kinds of changes in pedagogical practices that will support student learning. (p. 680).

Despite the general consensus that professional development is an important part of a teacher's work, there is much debate in educational research literature about exactly how teachers should approach their professional learning. Thus, it becomes important to consider the varied and unique ways that teachers are engaging in professional learning in order to better understand what they see as most effective and impactful for their teaching.

In addition to the importance of understanding what activities constitute valuable professional development for teachers, the role of context on the teachers' professional choices is similarly impactful. That is to say, thoughtful attention to the ways that teachers seek out new professional learning within particular teaching settings can further illuminate the various definitions of professional development, especially with regards to issues that vary with teaching contexts such as access to resources and administrative support for professional learning. With a broadened view of professional development and carefully considering the role of place in those professional development choices, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How do teachers in rural school districts engage in professional development?
- What factors constrain and promote professional development in rural school districts?

Theoretical Framework

Although professional development is an important issue that carries challenges in any teaching context, rural school districts have faced particular challenges due to geographic and professional isolation. One way to make sense of the particularities of places is to adopt a theoretical lens that foregrounds the interactions between places and people. As Corbett (2010) points out, "We need, as professionals, to embrace theory, and particularly social theory to work as hard as we can to understand social context and the layers of complexity that context, diversity, and the specificity of place introduce into our work" (p. 82). Thus this study was undertaken with a particular attention to the role that context plays in providing or constraining professional development opportunities for teachers in rural school districts. In adopting a critical sociocultural perspective (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007), this work combines

understandings from the "intersection of social, cultural, historical, mental, physical, and, more recently, political aspects of people's sense-making, interaction, and learning around texts" (p. 2). That is to say, learning, and in this case, teachers' learning about practice and pedagogy, is situated within and mediated by a multitude of factors that contribute to individual and collective experiences in a given setting (Vygotsky, 1978). But these factors do not only impact the nature of the teachers' learning. Teachers' identities are transformed through their participation in a community of practice, and their participation transforms the material circumstances and shared understandings of the community of practice and the people within it. As Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, "A person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, indeed it subsumes, the learning of knowledgeable skills" (p. 29). It is necessary, then, to understand the factors that affect teachers' engagement with professional development such as geographical and historical context, social and intellectual engagement with fellow teachers, and political and economic access in order to fully understand teachers' professional learning. The goal of this research is "to understand the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional setting, on the other" (Wertsch, 1995, p. 56). This work is sociocultural in that it places an emphasis on studying how teachers' professional learning and development happen in particular contexts, at particular moments in time, for particular purposes.

In addition to an understanding that teachers' learning happens within a sociocultural context, this analysis seeks to extend this framework to include an analysis of issues of power, identity, and agency in teachers' professional development. Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007) argue for a critical sociocultural theory of research in order to foreground these issues in studies

of literacy and literacy learning: "It is an explicit analysis of these unpredictable productions of power, as well as the systemic workings of power, that is often missing from sociocultural perspectives on the learning of literate practice" (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 18). Indeed, teachers' identity, power, and agency are always already at work within their professional lives and the schools in which they work. As Apple (1989) has noted, "The 'mere' fact that the state wishes to find 'more efficient' ways to organize teaching does not guarantee that this will be acted upon by teachers who have a long history of work practices and self-organization once the doors to their rooms are closed" (p. 39). By closely examining the teachers' conceptions of themselves and their work within schools and communities of practice, this study makes visible the issues of identity, agency, and power at work in two rural school districts in northern Wisconsin. With this view of critical sociocultural research, then, and following Crotty's (1998) definition of current critical research, I aim to keep "the spotlight on power relationships within society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice" (p. 157). Power differentials in a school system affect every aspect of a teacher's work, including formal and informal engagement in professional development activities.

Characteristics of High Quality Professional Development

In spite of the ongoing discussions of how professional development should be configured, delivered, and internalized by and for teachers, a recent shift in the literature toward more participatory professional development activities has given rise to several common threads that characterize high quality professional development. Specifically, valuable professional development opportunities are those that are situated in a teacher's unique teaching setting, complex enough to reflect the dynamic nature of education, and ongoing to allow for an iterative learning process for the teacher.

High Quality Professional Development Is Situated in Teachers' Contexts

Teaching contexts and teachers' needs vary drastically from one teaching situation to the next. While there are certainly commonalities in the expectations for teachers' work, even nationwide teaching initiatives (such as the integration of the Common Core State Standards and movement toward Response to Intervention) are interpreted differently in different places. It stands to reason, then, that teacher learning must be similarly situated in teachers' unique needs and contexts. Borko (2004) and Putnam and Borko (2000) point out that physical and social contexts are integral parts of learning activities for teachers. In this sense, "situatedness" takes on two meanings for teachers' professional development. The content of the professional development must reflect the specific needs of the teachers' school and district, and the learning situation in which the professional development occurs must be conducive to teacher learning. Not only should the learning objectives for teachers engaging in professional development match the teachers' expectations for their learning, the professional development itself must be situated within a larger culture and community of learning. Little (1982) explains that a "prevailing norm of collegiality" provides the most conducive environment for teacher learning (p. 339). If school districts and teachers are to create this kind of collaboration and collegiality, then districts and teachers must expand their notions of what counts as important for this kind of environment. As Borko (2004) says, "Learning occurs everywhere in a teacher's profession" (p. 4). Daily activities such as those conversations in the hallways between classes, connection to educational research through blogs or social media, and teachers' individual inquiry and reflection about their teaching all contribute to a sense of shared learning and growth for the teachers.

High Quality Professional Development Is Complex

Perhaps the most important shift in the professional development literature is the shift toward teachers' agentic roles in their professional learning. With this shift, professional development becomes more complex and more closely resembles the complexity of teaching itself. Gone are the days when a knowledgeable expert can arrive at the school for a half-day workshop and expect that teachers' practice will change dramatically as a result. Indeed, it is a matter of some debate as to whether this was ever an effective method for professional development. Instead, high quality professional development that is complex allows teachers to work through the various problems and inspirations that arise in teaching on a daily basis. "The key shift is one of agency: from programs that change teachers to teachers as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in professional development programs and in practice" (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002, p. 948). In this way, the process of professional learning becomes an iterative one; teachers seek out answers to questions that arise in their teaching situations, implement changes, reflect on the impact of those changes, and modify their questions to find further information. Through an iterative process like this, teachers modify their learning to respond to the complexity of their specific teaching situations. Rather than seeking out simple answers to the questions about their practice (as are touted by many one-stop workshops), teachers embrace the changing nature of their own learning needs in order to become active agents of change in their classrooms.

High Quality Professional Development Is Ongoing

Very closely tied to the idea that professional learning must be complex to reflect the complexity of teachers' learning needs is the idea that professional learning must also be ongoing. "Activities that extend over time are more likely to allow teachers to try out new practices in the classroom and obtain feedback on their teaching" (Garet, Porter, Desimone,

Birman, & Yoon, 2001, p. 922). It is not sufficient to expect that a teachers' practice can be changed as simply as changing one aspect of their practice. Instead, teachers, like their students, need time and space to think through the new learning and incorporate that learning into their practice in a way that makes sense to them. While discrete methods might be helpful in the short term, for teachers to make deeper and wider reaching changes to their practice, an ongoing process of professional learning provides opportunities for teachers to assess the effectiveness of the methods over time and make adjustments on an as-needed basis. In many school districts, this idea of providing time for ongoing professional development is taking the form of professional learning communities. Teachers who are interested in similar lines of inquiry for their practice collaborate over the course of months or school years in order to learn about and try out new practices with the ongoing support of interested others. Teachers actively participate in shaping their professional learning, but that learning is understood to be a process of trial and error that requires a sustained attention and support from colleagues.

These three aspects of high quality professional development—that it must be situated, complex, and ongoing—have changed the face of what teachers expect for their professional learning. Not only does this view of professional learning more closely fit the needs of their specific teaching situations, it more closely matches the process of learning that teachers expect and support for their students.

Research Contexts

Data for this study were collected using a case study methodology that examined the cases of two teachers in two different rural school districts in northern Wisconsin. These two districts and the surrounding communities, located in neighboring counties, shared many similarities. Both had village populations of less than 500 people, district enrollment of about

200 and 280 for grades pre-K through 12, high rates of poverty, and predominantly White residents. This is not meant to imply, however, that these two schools are so similar that they are to be confused or collapsed into a representative (and stereotypical) rural school. In fact, the cultures of each school differed considerably, and the teachers' experiences with professional development are examples of just how unique school settings can be, even with many demographic features in common.

This paper focuses on the professional development activities of two teachers, Sandy Hernandez and Samuel Bruce. Both participants identify as White, and both are in their mid 50s. Sandy is the charter school director in the Sycamore School District. Sandy's role as the charter school director (and only teacher for the charter school, which has had an enrollment of two to ten students in its three years of existence) consists mostly of guiding students' independent, self-directed projects. In this project-based charter school aimed at both enrichment and remediation, Sandy acts as a guide, a mentor, and a counselor as students seek out community and school resources to complete their projects. Samuel is a business education teacher in the Hawthorn School District. Samuel's course load changes each year as the students' needs change, but he most often teaches classes in keyboarding to middle school students and computer applications, accounting, and personal finance classes to high school students. Sandy's and Samuel's stories illustrate the various and negotiated ways that teachers define professional development and underscore the need for a broader conception of professional development.

Redefining Professional Development: Sandy and Samuel's Stories

High Quality Professional Development Is Situated in Teachers' Contexts

For Sandy and Samuel, the most valuable kinds of professional development were those that were self-initiated and directly related to their personal goals for their teaching and their

lives. Interestingly, although they both acknowledged the need to study and implement district and state initiatives such as the Common Core Standards and Response to Intervention, neither teacher saw these professional development offerings as particularly beneficial to their teaching. Instead, Sandy and Samuel were most impacted by professional development that spoke to their interests as teachers.

Sandy's two years of service in the Peace Corps were particularly meaningful to her. In fact, it was clear from the tone of her voice, the frequency with which she referred to her time there, and the depth of emotion that she displayed when discussing those two years that Sandy's experiences with the Peace Corps had transformed her in very important ways. Having lived in Wisconsin her whole life, Sandy wanted to experience life in another country and to serve in a way that would make a global impact. She wanted to be challenged, and she wanted to be changed as a result of her service. In order to serve in the Peace Corps, Sandy asked for a two-year leave of absence from her school district. The district granted her the leave, which allowed Sandy the security of having a job when she returned to Sycamore. Returning to the classroom after such a life-changing experience also allowed Sandy to share her new understandings with her students. As a teacher trainer in one country in southern Africa, Sandy worked with preschool teachers and other teacher trainers to develop an AIDS awareness curriculum for young children. She talked passionately and at length about the exact ways that she was transformed because of the perspective she gained. She said, "What an experience, though. I mean, oh my God. I learned so much about myself, about my country, about a bazillion things that I had to learn on the spot, you know? It was amazing." While Sandy's time in the Peace Corps was related to teaching, it did not directly relate to the teaching she had done in Sycamore. Instead, she learned about herself as a person and her place in the world. She gained the

invaluable perspective of learning about her own privilege as a White, American woman. She explained, "You walk through the areas where there are dying people along the streets and you're worried about getting pick-pocketed or mugged because *this* [pointing to herself] is wealthy. This is extreme wealth. I mean, here? I'm low income. There? I'm…[gesturing with hand to indicate height]." This experience of realizing her privilege had a major impact on Sandy's understanding of herself. What's more, the impact on Sandy was so great that when she returned to Sycamore, she felt compelled to provide her students with a similar sort of perspective. She explained that her time in Africa helped her to understand her students differently too. Since returning to teaching, she has found herself trying to explain to her students that there is a great big world outside of Sycamore and they should seek opportunities to experience as much of it as they can. She also tries to give her students a sense of perspective, especially when they complain about things that are most often thought of as typical teenage complaints. Furthermore, with her position as the charter school director, Sandy is able to help students consider a global perspective when they choose their independent projects. Thus, in this way, Sandy's transformation has affected her teaching in ways that she may not have expected when she joined the Peace Corps.

While her experiences were uniquely situated in a context very different from her own teaching context, Sandy's teaching changed as a result of her time in Africa. Sandy has made the learning that she experienced in the Peace Corps applicable to her teaching in northern Wisconsin. Her learning in the Peace Corps was continuous, hands-on, directly relevant to her work as a teacher trainer, and deeply situated within a particular context. Because her learning was so connected to her learning context, the impact on Sandy was deep and lasting. In this sense, Sandy experienced what Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) call "Change as growth or

learning—teachers 'change inevitably through professional activity'; teachers are themselves learners who work in a learning community" (p. 948). Sandy's personal growth impacted her teaching in ways that even she may not have expected. Service in the Peace Corps would not be immediately pegged as a professional development option for teachers, especially because it is, in many cases, distantly removed from a teacher's teaching context. But Sandy's experience shows that her own personal growth can impact the teaching situation in valuable ways.

For Samuel, who is nearing the end of his career and who has accumulated "stacks of CEU's [Continuing Education Units]" over the course of his career, the most valuable professional development is the kind that is clearly and directly connected to his teaching situation. As a business education teacher, Samuel teaches in a content area that is considered to be outside of the core academic classes; his courses, with the exception of keyboarding, are considered optional and elective. As such, many of the district, state, and national mandates such as Common Core Standards are not aimed at his curricula. It stands to reason then, that much of the district-initiated professional development often did not relate directly to his curriculum. Those professional development activities that do connect, that are situated within his teaching needs and interests, are the ones that he valued highly. Often, these are activities and connections that he has sought out on his own time, much like Sandy. Samuel is an avid reader and a lover of all things technology-related. He said, "I'm constantly reading blogs. Constantly reading news. I go to Google News, I go to USA News. I constantly read stuff online, I just don't read print. I'm always looking at technology, the different topics." These news sources are not just sources of interesting reading outside of school; Samuel uses the information he finds online to inform his teaching and practice. Perhaps the online reading that has had the most impact on his teaching has been his participation in an online forum for business education teachers. In this forum,

Samuel is able to get specific feedback about questions that are directly related to his teaching. And, more than just advice about pedagogy, Samuel uses the forums to seek out new sources of professional development such as books or other kinds of online information. He describes the blog:

> There's a number of things there. It's a great resource. It's really fantastic because you can ask a question about just about anything and somebody will come back with, "Oh, you can do this or this." It may not be super good all the time, but just about always you put something out there and they'll go, "Yeah, I do this." Or there will be requests for books and recommendations for different curriculum and stuff. People say, "I use this, or don't use this. That one wasn't so good." It's a great resource, it really is.

Through his participation in the online forum, Samuel is able to be part of a community of practice. This is especially important to Samuel who is the only business education teacher in his district. Unlike his colleagues who have at least one other person who shares content area concerns, Samuel is on his own. Instead, he finds the kinds of professional development that occurs in conversations through online communication. Furthermore, this online communication provides the kind of immediately-useful information that makes his time spent on the forum very practical and useful to his professional development needs. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) contend that "By engaging in joint professional development, [teachers] may be able to integrate what they learn with other aspects of their instructional context" (p. 922). Although Garet, Porter, Desmione, Birman, and Yoon assumed that collective participation in professional development would happen amongst teachers who share students and curricula within a single school or district, Samuel does not have that option in his small, rural school

district. Instead, online discussions serve the same purpose of providing collective participation with an interested community of teachers.

A second kind of professional development that provides the very situated learning that Samuel prefers is the professional development that originates in his school district. While Samuel has little respect for outside "experts" that come to the Hawthorn School District in order to "solve all the teachers' problems," he does value in-house professional development activities that guide teachers in analyzing their district data. Samuel sees these professional development sessions as particularly tied to the needs of his district, and thereby also very valuable. He explains:

> We analyze our WKCE [Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam] testing, we look at the ACT testing. "How come these kids are doing better than those kids? What makes that happen?" Ever since I've been here, way back at the beginning until now, you could get almost a one-to-one correlation to poverty and grades. It's just we have 75% of our kids are on reduced and free lunch. A lot of these kids have a rough time doing well when you worry about staying warm, getting food in your stomach. When you've got those Maslow's highest needs not being met very well, it's hard to excel. And it's been that way ever since I've been here. This is a relatively poor area. It's good to analyze that and see that all the kids that come here on a daily basis, their lives aren't all that great.

For Samuel, understanding the context in which he teaches is central to understanding test scores, student performance, and professional development that seeks to solve the district's problems. Thus, the more situated in his needs the professional development is, the more valuable it is.

High Quality Professional Development Is Complex

In stark contrast to his descriptions of situated professional development, Samuel also describes his experiences with professional development that is simplistic, and he has had many experiences with simplistic professional development in his career. One activity that he described in particular evoked little more than disdain. He described a time when the district hired a presenter to come to Hawthorn. The presenter said to the teachers, "Well, we're going to make you all so much more organized, and you're going to be able to really work things out yourself. Here's a banana, let's make a tool out of this!" I thought surely Samuel was exaggerating or being facetious in describing their tasks, but he went on, "These guys were getting paid! [They said to us] 'Look at these things, we've got a flyswatter, we've got a…' and they threw all this stuff on the table. And we went along with the whole gig, and we did our best to put our teams together. This was supposed to help our development?! Maybe it did, I don't know." In describing this experience, Samuel characterized the professional development that does not reflect the needs of his classroom. Instead, the professional developer seemed to expect that an experience that asked teachers to solve problems in unique ways would somehow transfer to the problems that they encountered in their teaching. Teaching itself requires teachers to constantly come up with creative solutions to problems that arise unexpectedly, so a professional development activity that encourages teachers to solve problems with bananas and flyswatters belies the complexity of daily teaching and assumes (rather insultingly) that if teachers only had more problems-solving skills or better organizational skills, all of the ills of education would be solved. To simplify teaching in this way is justifiably offensive to Samuel, and it has left such a sour taste in his mouth that he associates all professional development with this kind of simplistic and decontextualized series of activities rather than with the valuable activities he chooses to engage in when he truly has a question about his teaching.

One of the most complex and valuable professional development activities that Samuel has engaged in is grant writing to secure technology funds for the Hawthorn School District. Part of his job is to be the district's tech liaison. As such, Samuel has analyzed the technology needs of the district and worked to provide technology that isn't available to many students in the community outside of the school grounds. He described his involvement with pride:

> Some of the professional development that I did on my own, in [Hawthorn] we ewre one of the very first in the northern part of the state of Wisconsin—if I could pat myself on the back I guess—is that we were one of the first to put in networks. When the first Macs came out, the little boxes, I wrote a grant, got a whole bunch in my room, and everybody in the neighborhood got a Mac. And we hooked them together, we shared printers, we shared information. And it was one of the very first in the CESA that did this. And people in the CESA would come to [Hawthorn] to see how I did it.

This work was not only complex in terms of the physical labor that Samuel did to install the networks ("I crawled over the rafters in the ceiling and hung the wires. Did everything myself pretty much."); it was also complex in that the professional development was driven by a particular need and reflected what Samuel saw as the future of education in the district. Throughout his career, Samuel has continued to read and analyze current trends in technology, and he continues to write grants in order to get the latest technology for the district. Once he installs the new technologies (such as Kindles for the library, portable laptop carts, Netbooks, and iPads), Samuel is also responsible for supporting other teachers to integrate the technology into their curricula. Thus, Samuel's role in making Hawthorn a technologically advanced school district is wide-reaching. He must know how to use a wide variety of equipment in all grade levels and subject areas, and he must help other teachers apply that knowledge to their work.

The nature of education is constantly in flux, and teachers like Samuel work to find new ways to engage students, such as through the use of technology. Samuel's interest in meeting that challenge makes his grant writing professional development valuable even beyond his own classroom.

High Quality Professional Development Is Ongoing

Both Sandy and Samuel acknowledged the importance of staying current with local and national education policies. However, when they describe the professional development that accompanies these initiatives, both Sandy and Samuel take on a tone of disengagement. Often state and national policies are rolled out to teachers through district-initiated professional development that take the form of one-day (or less) trainings. These trainings are just not as influential as the professional development that Sandy and Samuel choose for themselves. Sandy explains, "We're encouraged to attend things about RtI and PBIS and those kinds of professional development offerings throughout the year. And we're always working on curriculum development and that sort of stuff." She sees these initiatives as a natural part of her day-to-day work rather than as professional development experiences that allow her to think deeply about her teaching. Samuel agreed: "We have the curriculum updates, Core Curriculum, and that's not professional development; that's just something that we have to do because of requirements of the state." Sandy and Samuel share the feeling that the district-initiated professional development focused on national educational trends are not meaningful or impactful to their teaching. Yet this represents a tension between the goals of the districts and the goals of the teachers. Both the Hawthorn and Sycamore school districts readily fund activities that will support teachers in adopting these initiatives in their classrooms. But this is not the kind of professional development that the teachers find valuable to their classrooms. This is partly due

to the fact that the trainings are delivered in a one-shot manner; they are not ongoing. Rather than allowing teachers to learn new ideas over time and implement those ideas in their classrooms throughout their learning process, the state and district initiatives are delivered to teachers in a way that expects them to make sweeping changes to their curriculum without also allowing them time to fully learn about the new techniques. In fact, when Sandy first began to think about how the Common Core Standards would impact her teaching, she found that she was not very successful. She said:

> I tried to do it [mapping her curriculum] last year without any of the background knowledge about the Common Core State Standards and the SMARTer Balanced Assessments because nobody really knew anything about that yet. So I just did it the way I always did it, which was to go through the textbook and put in the stuff, which was really easy and not very time-consuming, but also not very effective. So now I have to go back and really look at the standards and figure out how I'm going to teach these standards.

With time and space to think about the impact of the Common Core Standards on her curriculum, Sandy is better able to implement lasting and thoughtful changes that blend the needs of her students with the requirements of the district goals. Furthermore, Samuel points out that initiatives change rapidly, before teachers truly have time to make lasting changes to their practice, "because next year, something else comes up." Professional development that is ongoing allows teachers to internalize new methods and practices, but it also values the time and effort that it takes to truly learn and grow and change. As Wineburg, Grossman, Myhre, and Woolworth (1998) point out, "If schools and districts intend to reconstitute schools as 'learning communities,' they must take the long view: creating 'community' is no quick fix. In a political

climate shaped by tighter budgets and calls for greater accountability, policy makers may be wary of approaches to teacher development that recognize the non-linear nature of personal and professional transformation. It will take both commitment and courage to provide teachers the time they need to 'chew on texts'" (p. 32). A commitment to teachers' professional development also requires a commitment to the ongoing and communal nature of learning itself.

Conclusion

In their call for policy reform that supports teachers' professional development, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) state, "Effective professional development involves teachers both as learners and as teachers and allows them to struggle with the uncertain ties that accompany each role. It has a number of characteristics.

- It must engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development.
- It must be grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant-driven.
- It must be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers.
- It must be connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students.
- It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice.
- It must be connected to other aspects of school change" (p. 598).

Sandy's and Samuel's professional development activities meet these criteria, although their experiences are probably not what most educational researchers would classify as professional

development. Indeed, even Sandy and Samuel defined professional development in terms of the required district trainings rather than the valuable activities described here. When I asked them about professional development, they told stories of seminars, and trainings, and required initiatives. However, when I asked them what sustains them as teachers and what activities most impact their practice, they told stories of self-initiated inquiries, and difficult but rewarding undertakings, and time spent on reflection and research. The teachers in this study engage in professional development through varied and unique paths, but the learning that they do is grounded in genuine inquiry and interest in providing the best education they can for their students.

I do not mean to argue that professional development that focuses on state and national initiatives are not valuable for teachers. Teachers, including Samuel and Sandy, feel that it is crucial for them to stay current with educational trends and to constantly reenvision their practice. However, a tension arises when this is the only kind of professional development that is acknowledged, funded, and valued in school districts. Instead, I argue that the definition of professional development needs to be expanded to provide space for teachers' inquiries and interests. Districts need to trust teachers' professional knowledge and expertise so that a teacher who wants to pursue an unconventional professional development path has the support of her administrators and colleagues. Furthermore, a redefinition of what counts as professional development does not necessarily require a larger budget or more resources; teachers don't necessarily need to go to the Peace Corps as Sandy did in order to experience truly transformative professional development. Many of the resources that teachers need to engage in professional development—time to talk with like-minded professionals, an environment of collaboration, and shared commitments and willingness to try new things—are available within

districts or communities. By working together and supporting one another, administrators and teachers have the means to provide professional development that is situated in teachers' contexts, complex enough to reflect the dynamic nature of education, and ongoing to allow for an iterative approach to learning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

Implications

Nearly all educational researchers and education professionals agree that professional development is an integral part of a teacher's work. Professional development allows teachers to stay connected to the field of education and their specific content area, learn new teaching techniques, re-envision their practice, reflect on their successes and shortcomings, and collaborate with peers. Yet, in the current climate of tight school budgets, the opportunities for teachers' professional development are becoming more limited for teachers, and it becomes increasingly difficult for administrators to justify professional development that isn't directly connected with the many state and national educational mandates that teachers must know and use. Despite a continued commitment to teachers' professional development in state and national policy documents, tighter budgets and increased demands for specific inservice teacher training have constrained the opportunities available to teachers for professional development. As teachers are constantly asked to do more with fewer resources, professional development gets pushed aside. This situation is often compounded in rural areas where resources are limited and access to professional development opportunities is difficult due to geographical distance. What's more, much professional development is aimed at teachers who teach in non-rural areas, which can make professional development offerings seem ill-suited to rural teachers' situations and practices.

Given the constraints experienced by rural, isolated school districts in attaining access to professional development resources, it is important to realize that professional development can take a multitude of forms. Professional development opportunities are often decided and

provided for in vastly different ways across districts and across states. Understanding the nature of teachers' engagement with professional development in rural districts can yield a more complex picture about how unequal resources affect teachers' engagement with professional development. Beyond an understanding of what is available and accessible to teachers in rural areas, it is also important to understand teachers' views of the roles that professional development plays in their professional lives. This research sought to shed light on some of these areas of inquiry. Based on the narratives of the participants in this study, several important implications about rural teachers' professional development arise for various professional development stakeholders.

Teachers in Rural Areas

For teachers in rural areas, it seems a crucial point to find a balance between professional development that is required to stay current with the educational landscape while also pursuing individual goals that help teachers form new understandings of their roles as teachers. For example, in Sandy's case, she was willing to make sacrifices of her time and comfort to pursue the opportunities that she felt would transform and sustain her teaching. Not all teachers need to make these same sacrifices. However, teachers can guide their own professional development by seeking opportunities for networking, or involvement in professional organizations, or even self-study that will provide them with ways of seeing their teaching anew.

In addition to seeking out resources to support their individual goals, teachers in rural school districts can seek out ways to meaningfully collaborate with peers across traditional divisions of content areas and grade levels. In many small and rural school districts, there may be only one teacher in a content-area department for grades six through twelve, making content-area collaboration more difficult. Or, in elementary grades, there may be only one teacher for each

grade level. Unlike much traditional professional development that is content-area or grade-level specific, teachers in teaching situations like these must seek out new ways of understanding professional development so that teachers can share initiatives that cut across these traditional barriers. Samuel, for example, frequently seeks out professional development opportunities such as technology grants and sports initiatives that unite teachers from a variety of grade levels and disciplines. Finding ways to collaborate with peers outside the traditional boundaries leads to important school and teacher improvements that benefit a wider swath of school professionals.

Rural School Administrators

District administrators need to find a similar balance of supporting teachers' individual professional learning as well as state and district goals. One way to work toward this balance is to nurture the goals of the teachers in the district and look to the teachers as experts in various teaching practices. Thus, the professional development comes from the inside, rather than the outside, and teachers are able to see their school network as a site of shared goals that complement the district goals. This requires a distinct and conscious shift toward professional development as a worthwhile endeavor toward teachers' learning, not just toward students' outcomes. In other words, district administrators (in all districts, not just rural ones) should direct more attention to the positive outcomes that come from teachers' professional learning and reflection rather than seeing teachers as the filter through which high quality teaching practices flow in order to reach students. Furthermore, a view of professional development that values teacher learning, not just student achievement results, also values teachers' professional knowledge about themselves. Carefully developed and implemented professional learning communities are one way of achieving professional development that focuses on teachers'

unique and relevant areas of inquiry while also supporting new learning about state and national educational requirements.

For rural school administrators in particular, a more complex view of professional development is particularly important. Given the difficulties of geographical distance to many professional development opportunities, rural districts can and must see the wealth of resources they have in their teachers. Rural district administrators can cultivate a culture of teacher professional learning by honoring teachers' professional interests and providing time, space, and materials to support systematic inquiry of those interests.

Universities and Other Agencies that Offer Professional Development

Universities and other professional development agencies have a role to play in making professional development more readily available to teachers in rural areas. One way to do this is to provide opportunities that are located in teachers' communities. This could be achieved through distance or online learning programs if those programs were uniquely tailored to the needs of the communities they serve. In part this means an attention to the things that universities hold dear, such as proximity to diverse scholars and a culture of constant learning. Considering how a culture like this could be cultivated within rural communities might provide one way to create opportunities for situated, complex, and ongoing professional development, even in places that are distant from the university.

Educational Researchers

Finally, one of the most difficult aspects of this research has been the uncovering of many stereotypes about rural places, but I think there is immense potential in deeper study of these contexts. Teachers in rural schools are doing innovative things to solve the problems of distance and access that often characterize rural places. Rural communities provide models of school and

community partnerships that could be beneficial to other types of school settings. And, rural places, like urban places, are in need of attention in order to avoid deficit thinking and subsequent hollowing out of these towns. This is not a matter of deciding whose cause is more needy than somebody else's; rather, this is a matter of seeing the potential in partnerships and further research as a way of strengthening educational research.

Conclusions

Beyond the implications of teachers' individual professional development choices in rural school districts, there is a recurring theme in this research. At every turn in the research process, I have bumped up against the idea that there is simply not enough research about rural educators and the importance of place in studying rural contexts. Yet, there is no shortage of questions and calls for future research about the particularities of rural contexts in educational research. This signifies a deeper and more complex problem: It is not the lack of research about rural places and teachers that is the problem. It is the deeply-ingrained ideas about rurality that prevent more meaningful research and subsequent dissemination of that research into larger educational research and policy spheres. While some views of rural schools characterize them as representing a more perfect past, free of the problems of overcrowded and underfunded urban schools, other views characterize them as "backward, conservative, and irrelevant" (Howley & Howley, 2010, p. 47). Research needs to find a balance between deficit models that see only problems and idyllic models that see only benefits. Rural schools, like all schools, are more complex and complicated than either of these views suggest. Just as there is danger in single views of other schooling environments (such as those that have characterized urban schools, online schools, and charter schools), there is danger in seeing rural schools through a single lens.

The role that context plays in understanding how education works for various groups of students, teachers, administrators, districts, and communities cannot be understated. This research sought to explore some of the roles that context plays in rural teachers' professional and personal lives, but, as evidenced by the countless calls for further research, more work remains for educational researchers. Beyond the proliferation of more research about the particular roles that context plays in rural school settings, a more robust exploration of the subtleties and nuances of the interplay between a context and the people who inhabit that context will work to combat the dichotomous stereotypes that too often characterize rural spaces. More work is needed, not just with rural settings as the backdrop, but about the larger implications of rurality for schools and the people who choose to live and work in rural areas.

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