

Against the Grain: Narratives of Rural Teachers' Professional Lives

Jessica Gallo

This study explored the question “What roles does rurality play in the professional lives of teachers in a Midwestern state?” Using narrative analysis of four participants’ interviews about their lives and work in two rural towns, this paper compares participants’ stories with dominant narratives about rural schools and communities in published literature. Common depictions of rural people, places, and work often oversimplify the complex relationships among the school, community, staff, and students. This study found that participants (1) feel a sense of belonging in rural places despite the challenges of living and working there, (2) create and maintain a strong professional family in order to mitigate the difficulties of recruitment and retention in rural schools, and (3) experience school and community partnerships that are both supportive and challenging. As a result of this analysis, this study 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.

When Sam Bruce (all names are pseudonyms) 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, a community of about 400 people in another Midwestern state. (Note: The names of all study sites are pseudonyms. Rockford, IL is not a study site and is used here as part of a direct quote from a participant interview.) It was not 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. Sam chose Hawthorn because he perceived the quality of life to be better, even if it meant lower pay.

Sandy Hernandez had lived near Sycamore (in the same Midwestern state where Sam lived) most of her life. She grew up near Sycamore and taught there for 17 years before joining the Peace Corps. After completing her service as a teacher trainer in Lesotho, Africa, she returned to Sycamore and resumed her teaching position. Knowing that many of her students might live their whole lives in or near their small, rural community, as she had, Sandy returned to her classroom with a renewed sense of duty to help her students gain a broader perspective of the world and their places in it.

Sam’s decision to choose a high quality of life over higher pay evokes a familiar rural narrative: although they are not economically robust, rural places offer “the good life” with supportive

communities, picturesque scenery, and nice people. Sandy’s experiences as a long-time resident of one rural community and a teacher focused on helping her rural students gain a global perspective highlight two additional images of rural places: rural residents tend to be geographically place-bound, and, because of this, they lack a deep understanding of the world beyond their home communities. Sam and Sandy’s depictions of their lives and work in rural places reinforce some of the popular thinking about their communities. 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 area 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). However, the truth about Sandy’s and Sam’s lives as teachers in rural communities is considerably more complex than these simplistic narratives suggest.

This research explores what it means to be a teacher in a rural place and how educators in two districts in a Midwestern state uphold and subvert notions about their work and their lives in rural schools through their narrative depictions of their professional lives. As a former rural resident and teacher, I began this research with the question, “What role does rurality play in the professional lives of teachers?” The teachers’ stories in this study challenge the taken-for-granted ideas about what it means to teach in rural areas of this Midwestern state.

Relevant Depictions of Rural People and Places in Published Literature

One common theme in published literature about rural people and places is the fact that rurality defies definition (see, for example, Coladarci, 2007; Stern, 1994; Arnold et al., 2005). Despite the varied definitions of what constitutes rurality, there is no shortage of stereotypes that characterize rurality as a single, simple state of being. According to Theobald and Wood (2010), for example, 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). On the other hand, rural places are held up equally often as “uncomplicated, innocent, more genuine society in which ‘traditional values’ persist and lives are more real” (Little & Austin, 1996, p. 102). These competing depictions of rurality contradict one another, and yet they often work together to create a simplified, single narrative about rural life. Beneath these overly simplistic depictions of rurality lies a more complicated truth. The following brief literature review provides a backdrop against which the people in this study narrate their lives and work.

Rural People Lack Resources

Rural places are often described in the literature as impoverished, both economically (Mattingly, et al., 2011; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Thiede et al., 2018) and educationally (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Provasnik et al., 2007; Gibbs 2000). Slack (2010) found that working poverty, the state of people who work but whose wages are not enough to keep them out of poverty, is more prevalent and persistent in non-metro areas. It is almost expected that working in a rural place means lower pay, fewer economic opportunities, and more limited access to resources. This impoverished portrayal of rural places in general holds true for jobs in education too. Teachers in rural areas are often paid less than their peers who teach in non-rural areas (Miller, 2012). Furthermore, rural teachers are often depicted as professionally isolated and lacking resources necessary to perform or improve their jobs (Burton et al., 2013). Often the lack of economic and professional resources is linked to difficulties with teacher recruitment, retention, and turnover in rural schools as well (see, for example, DeYoung, 1991; White & Reid, 2008; Yarrow et al., 1999). Rural places are depicted as impoverished so

often in popular media and research literature that it is almost taken as a given that teachers who accept positions in rural schools must also accept lower pay and fewer resources.

Rural People Are Friendly

While rural places are frequently depicted as poor and lacking in resources, they are just as often depicted as tightly knit and neighborly. Countless movies and television shows sketch the rural community as friendly, as a place where people greet one another by name and ask about their families and recent events (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014). This vision of rural people and places fits what Azano and Stewart (2016) describe as the “idyllic rural trope.” They contend, “The idyllic rural trope is problematic not because it erroneously suggests that all rural communities are tight knit, harmonious places, but because it perpetuates a Pollyanna view of rurality and disarms efforts to address unique rural challenges” (p. 115). In research about rural school communities, the idyllic rural trope often serves as a counterpoint to the relatively lower pay that teachers might expect to earn in a rural school. Because of the smaller school population in rural districts, rural teachers may have smaller class sizes compared to their urban and suburban peers (Jimerson, 2006), allowing teachers to develop more personalized relationships with students and their parents. Among the benefits of small class size is higher academic achievement (Jimerson, 2006), increased capacity for teachers to differentiate and individualize instruction (Graue et al., 2007), and fewer discipline problems (Zahorik, 1999). Research about these and other benefits of rural schools contribute to the idea that rural school communities are friendly, tightly knit, and welcoming places for teachers and students.

Rural People Support Their Schools

A third theme in rural education literature is the idea that schools enjoy above average commitment and engagement from community members (Jimerson, 2006; Wright, 2008; Preston, 2013; Burton et al., 2013). In many rural places, the school is a hub of the community, providing opportunities for employment, entertainment, and socializing (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Preston, 2013). Furthermore, rural schools often serve the purpose of “affirming and preserving the values of rural society that represent local tradition and history” (Wright, 2008, p. 346). These images of rural schools enjoying

above average community engagement paint an uncomplicated and peaceful picture of the relationships between rural schools and their communities that is somehow innate to rural locations. Although these may seem like positive attributes of rural places, too often these views serve to stereotype rural schools as simple and effortlessly perfect without considering the challenges that accompany rurality.

The depictions of rural people and places described in this literature review are three images that contribute to an overly simplistic narrative of what it is like to live and work in a rural place. In examining the ways that the teachers' stories align with and diverge from these common depictions of rural schools, this article provides deeper insight into the ways that the participants themselves construct their lives and work as rural educators.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study come from interviews with four participants in two school communities in a rural part of a Midwestern state centered on the research question "What role does rurality play in the professional lives of teachers?" To recruit participants for this study, I sent email invitations to administrators and teachers in five school districts in a rural area of a Midwestern state. The five districts included in the initial pool of invitations were those surrounding the district where I began my teaching career before becoming a researcher. Knowing some of the challenges that teachers in this area of the country face and knowing the importance of personal connections to rural areas, I selected districts that were familiar to me geographically, but which offered perspectives that were unfamiliar to me professionally. Of those five districts, two of them, Hawthorn and Sycamore, had teachers and administrators who were willing to participate in this study over the course of a school year and summer. I collected data about the schools and communities by attending school board meetings; reading community

and school public documents; interviewing the district administrators and teachers; and speaking informally with community members, parents, students, and teachers not participating in the study. Throughout data collection, I took field notes and wrote and recorded reflective memos that captured both my initial data analysis and my initial impressions of the schools and communities. These data helped me understand the political, social, and economic landscapes of the two communities and their school districts.

While the observational, informal, and document data helped to paint a clear picture of the communities, in-depth interviews with the participants provided extended narratives of the participants' lives and work within the two communities. The interview protocols were designed to elicit participants' narratives of the lives as teachers in rural communities (see sample interview protocol in the Appendix, which can be found at ruraleducator.info.) Over the course of the school year and summer, I interviewed two teachers, Sandy Hernandez and Sam Bruce, and their district administrators, John Petrachek and Ginny Duvall, in two school districts, Sycamore and Hawthorn (see Table 1). During the interviews, I asked participants to tell me about their lives personally and professionally and to talk about what it is like to live and teach in a rural community and school. The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours and took place at various sites of the participants' choosing. After transcribing all audio-recorded data, I used the qualitative research software NVivo to analyze the data. This digital tool allowed me to upload the multiple forms of data that I collected throughout the study (i.e. audio files of my research memos, document files of transcribed interviews, photos of the communities, and PDF files of school documents and newspaper clippings) and code and compare data across multiple file types. During the initial round of data analysis, I examined the participants' narratives, rereading multiple times to understand each participant's conceptions of rurality

Table 1
Study Participants

Pseudonym	Position	School District	Years in Current Position	Total Years in Education
Sam Bruce	Business Education Teacher	Hawthorn	33	33
Ginny Duvall	Superintendent	Hawthorn	6	26
Sandy Hernandez	English Teacher/Charter School Director	Sycamore	17	21
John Petrachek	Superintendent	Sycamore	1	30

as related to their teaching contexts. I used observational notes and research memos to provide additional details of the context for the teachers' narratives. Then, using line-by-line coding, I developed a set of codes to describe the participants' narratives as exemplified in Table 2.

Once I had created a set of codes for each interview transcript, I began to compare codes across transcripts, noting descriptive patterns that linked the four participants' experiences together. I then collapsed the codes into categories that described themes that the participants used to narrate their lives and work in their rural contexts. Finally, I compared the study participants' narratives to studies of rurality and rural education, noting instances where their stories converged with and diverged from published depictions of rural people and places.

Study Context: Hawthorn and Sycamore

On the surface, Hawthorn and Sycamore appear to have many similarities. Situated in neighboring counties, both towns are primarily considered logging and farming communities, and both communities are experiencing 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 the state 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 (90% and 97%, respectively), with American Indian and Black comprising the rest of the populations. Similar demographics are reflected in the schools. The median household income for Sycamore is approximately \$32,000 with about 22% categorized as living below the poverty level. In Hawthorn, the median household income is about \$44,000 and 10% of the population is considered to be below the poverty level (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Interestingly, the schools have similar rates of poverty to one another with about 50% of each school population considered economically disadvantaged ([State] Department of Public Instruction, 2018). Because both school districts draw students from several small communities and villages beyond Hawthorn's and Sycamore's city limits (including unincorporated communities), the demographics of the school districts do not always mirror the demographics of the towns in which the school buildings 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. In many ways, these communities both fit the dominant narratives of rural places, and it is easy to see how a surface-level look at Sycamore and Hawthorn might contribute to a stereotypical understanding of the lives of the people who live there. However, the participants in these communities are aware of the ways that rural schools and places are constructed in popular culture, and, in this study, they narrated their lives in opposition to, and sometimes in concert with, these dominant ideas. The overlapping and intersecting manner of the stories about their professional lives within these rural communities illustrates some of the complexity hidden in more

Table 2 Sample Codes

Code	Code Description	Example Data that Exemplify the Code
Rural Identity	Narratives that depict how participants define themselves.	"Folks see themselves as hard working with a rich history. They take a lot of pride in the community."
Challenges	Narratives that describe the challenges that participants or community members face due to rurality/remoteness/size of the community.	"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."
School-community relationships	Narratives that show the relationships between community members and the school.	"But this is his hometown, so you know. He understands that the school basically IS the crux of the community, you know. I mean the school is why the community exists, basically."

simplistic views of what it means to be a rural educator.

Participants' Narratives of Lives and Work in Rural Schools

Through my analysis of each participants' interview data, I identified three themes that characterized the way that participants described the role of rurality in their professional lives. The three themes are a sense of belonging, the creation and maintenance of a professional family, and a strong but complicated school-community connection.

A Shared Sense of Belonging, Despite the Trade-offs

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 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, Sam 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 is 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. Sam described 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. In comparison to the dominant narrative that rural places are closely-knit, this sense of belonging and general friendliness might be attributed to the fact that so many of the people in these two small communities have lived near one another for their entire lives, sometimes going back generations.

Despite the prevalence of a strong sense of belonging, Sam 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, although Sam has worked in the Hawthorn district for over 30 years, his own children went to school in another district because it offered opportunities that were not available in Hawthorn. He explained, "You know, I've taught here, coached here, done 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, (another nearby town)]. [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 or Sycamore must make the decision to live in a community that has little to offer them in terms of businesses, recreation, and work opportunities. 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 outside the town limits. Throughout the teachers' narratives, there is a sense that to be rural, you have to be a certain kind of person who values personal relationships, shared history, and a friendly atmosphere over the big-city amenities.

John Petrachek, Sandy Hernandez, Ginny Duvall, and Sam 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 evokes one of the very powerful, dominant narratives about rural people and places as being insular and suspicious of “outsiders.” Sometimes even people who grew up in or near Sycamore or Hawthorn could be seen as outsiders if they moved away from the community for a significant period of time. John, for example, describes himself as someone who has *returned to* the Sycamore area rather than someone who is *from* the area. Perhaps what long-time 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 rural people and places are frequently characterized as 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 suggest.

A Professional Family, for Those Who Stay

In much the same way the participants described a sense of belonging in a rural town, they also described a sense of belonging as a teacher in a rural school. For teachers in these two districts, there is a concerted effort to make sure a sense of support for teachers permeates the school climate. They frequently described this strong support system within the schools as a counterpoint to the challenges that come with a rural teaching position. For example, all the participants in this study described the difficulties of having a high rate of teacher turnover. Sam explained that they have a math teacher who is really good at her job and working with kids, and they want to keep her in the district. Sam thought that she would stay in her position 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. As both district administrators explained, new teachers to the districts, who are often young, unmarried teachers, leave when they get married and their spouse seeks employment. Thus, the staff face the prospect of turnover constantly.

When it comes to recruitment and retention, 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 in 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 all the teachers in the district “get a fresh perspective” from the beginning teachers who join the team. However, many of the teachers who take a job in Hawthorn or Sycamore for their first year move on to other jobs once 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] that wasn’t even certified but knew some math, so they pulled him in for a year! They [The students] 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 [the school board members] understand, you know, we're one of the lowest paid districts 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." The administrators of both districts shared the feeling of strong working relationships between faculty and administration. Ginny said that she feels supported and respected in her position and described her staff as hard working. She said, "Staff members do what it takes to succeed, and we all wear many hats. They go above and beyond and know they need to do whatever they can to help our students because resources are limited." Because it's difficult to attract and retain teachers, the school boards of Hawthorn and Sycamore also work with teachers to support them. The board members 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.

While many studies have documented the challenges of recruitment and retention, the factors that contribute to the high rate of turnover in schools are less often described in the literature. Sandy and Sam both described their districts' difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers as being directly connected to the combination of low pay and demanding workload. Sam 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 teaching preparations, combined with the flexible schedule that Sam described, requires teachers to be willing and able 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 workload 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 surprising 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 more likely to stay if they feel a sense of belonging in that community. However, Sandy and Sam both described numerous ways that teachers try to create a sense of community among colleagues too. Sandy said, "The faculty here at Sycamore is remarkable in its closeness. [...] It's very much like a family. 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 Sam described, it is a welcome addition to the strong sense of community among colleagues. Teachers can 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 Sam 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 workload 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 echoed these comments when she talked about the community within the Sycamore district:

They're *all* our students. They're all *everybody's* students. And that's how everyone here 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 took great pride in creating a sense of caring about their students, even if they didn't teach those students on a daily basis. That

feeling is not lost on the students. As Sam explained, "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. Given the difficulty these schools have in recruiting and retaining teachers, the teachers and staff in the districts go out of their way to create a sense of community within the schools to encourage longevity and to combat a sense of isolation. 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. For the teachers in this study, the idea of having a professional family is not just about living and working in a place where everyone knows everyone. Supporting colleagues is a professional necessity to offset the difficulty of recruiting and retaining teachers in challenging teaching positions. Too often, rural schools are painted in broad strokes as effortlessly close-knit because they have a smaller staff and fewer students. However, the participants in this study illustrate that the sense of community within the school is a result of a concerted effort to support one another and prevent the frequent turnover that haunts so many rural schools.

Strong, but Complicated, Community-School Connections

A third theme that came up repeatedly in the published literature and in the interviews for this study is the idea that rural communities often are painted as pastoral, idyllic, peaceful, and shades of a more perfect national past. Rural schools within these communities often are depicted as enjoying higher than average parent and community involvement and having ample funding from an adoring community willing to support the schools' every whim. This narrative serves many purposes for public and private, rural and urban interests alike. Local, state, and national politicians (of various political leanings) hold up this view of rural schools 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 agreed 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 individuals' 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, 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 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. In describing the relationship between the school and community, Ginny said, "We are very close and know most of the residents in our district." Given that the Hawthorn School District covers approximately 700 square miles of surrounding the community of Hawthorn, a close relationship of this kind is remarkable.

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." If community members feel that the school does not offer a quality education, the school is in danger of losing those students to other nearby districts through students'

open enrollment or families leaving the community altogether. 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 narrative that rural schools enjoy more community involvement rings true for the teachers of Hawthorn and Sycamore. However, this narrative oversimplifies 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 Sam both explained that people in the community want to give all they can 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." School personnel have to create a careful balance between providing attractive amenities and overburdening the community members with expensive initiatives.

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 must 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 to support the schools.

Because the schools are 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 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 and Sycamore, 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." Even though the participants in this study described 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, the schools attract their share of scrutiny as well as support, especially when it comes to 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, which fits 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 entire 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 schools strive 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 them. 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

The participants' narratives in this study describe professional lives that are rich, complex, and nuanced. Throughout the narratives, the participants showed that they were aware of the stereotypes that characterize communities like theirs, and they used their own narratives to paint a more complete picture of rural life and work. Sometimes they narrated their stories in ways that aligned with common depictions of rural people and places, especially when those depictions positively represented the benefits of working in rural communities. For example, their stories about closely-knit communities, teachers who can connect with all students, and community members who support and bolster the schools helped to confirm some of the positive portrayals of rural

places. Even in these positive depictions, however, the teachers wanted to be transparent about the challenges they faced and the costs they incurred to create those benefits for themselves and for their students. On the other hand, in some of their stories, it was clear that the teachers were also acutely aware of the negative stereotypes about rural people and places, and they worked to narrate their lives in opposition to those stereotypes. For example, while all the participants openly acknowledged the challenges of poverty and a lack of resources that made their jobs more difficult, they frequently explained how they also had access to other kinds of support that helped them mitigate those challenges, such as increased professional community. In other words, these four rural educators were very aware of the stereotypical depictions that exist about their professional lives, and they used their own stories to promote a more complex picture, sometimes speaking in concert with narratives that they saw as positive, and sometimes narrating their lives so as to combat those stereotypes. Most frequently, however, they used their narratives to add complexity and nuance to more simplistic and inaccurate stories about rural people and places.

The complex ways that the rural teachers narrated their lives goes beyond simply providing more detail about their communities. For the teachers in Hawthorn and Sycamore, working to combat harmful or inaccurate depictions of their communities could be an important survival tactic, particularly when it comes to solving the immediate and ongoing need to recruit and retain qualified teachers. In rural places like these two communities, they need to change the common depictions of rural communities so that teachers and families will choose to work and stay in these schools. It stands to reason that they do not only want to promote the positive benefits; teachers who choose Sycamore or Hawthorn should be prepared for workloads that can be onerous and pay that is well below that of more suburban or urban districts. On the other hand, they do not want teachers to discount rural districts based only on the negative stereotypes that abound in popular media without fully understanding the opportunities that might be comparatively unique to a small, rural school district. With a more complex representation of rural education within the field, researchers and teachers might aid rural school districts in painting a more thoughtful picture of both the benefits and the drawbacks of choosing a career in a rural area.

While this study is limited in its scope, it does provide useful implications for the field of rural research. This study focused on two rural school districts in a single Midwestern state. Thus, it is not meant to characterize rural places in general or to suggest that the narratives of the teachers in these particular rural places are representative of other rural places. To do so would only serve to re-inscribe the simplistic narratives of rurality. Instead, the narratives presented here demonstrate the complexity of the participants' lives, even as they are aware of the conclusions that people unfamiliar with rural areas will draw about them. The participants in this study know that they narrate their lives against the backdrop of numerous stereotypes about rural people and places that exist in research, collective imagination, and popular media. However, these teachers' stories urge 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 and bolster 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.

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 construed, 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 of our work take on the task of painting a complex picture of what it means to be rural. As researchers and teachers, we must be more careful in the ways that we represent rural schools and rural teachers. Much of the literature does provide a positive counterpoint to the negative

stereotypes, particularly when it comes to counteracting stereotypes of the rural bumpkin depicted in a lot of popular media. However, in our work to tackle the negative stereotypes, sometimes our depictions have the result of reinforcing overly simplistic positive stereotypes that leave teachers feeling overwhelmed at the work involved in a rural teaching assignment. Thus, the narrative pendulum of rural people and places swings back and forth between two competing sets of ideas, neither of which serve the populations they represent.

This narrative study is not only about a call for more research about rural places and schools in particular. Instead, this research calls for a more conscious and conscientious characterization of rural people and places that works to counteract dominant narratives. 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. With a more complete picture, teacher educators who serve rural communities might be better prepared to help teacher candidates negotiate the challenges and embrace the benefits of a rural teaching career. Universities and organizations that prepare teachers might be better able to attend to the implications of place so that teacher candidates graduate ready to work within and for the places they teach. Understanding the complexity and richness of rural narratives could help combat the abundant and overly simplistic narratives in popular media that cast rural places as backwards, insular, and ignorant. Indeed, changing our own views as rural researchers and teachers so that we avoid unwittingly perpetuating our own stereotypes is a good first step toward equitable representation of rural people and places.

References

- Arnold, M. L., Newman, J. H., Gaddy, B. B., & Dean, C. B. (2005). A look at the condition of rural education research: Setting a direction for future research. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 20*(6), 1-25. <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/20-6.pdf>
- Azano, A. P., & Stewart, T. T. (2016). Confronting challenges at the intersection of rurality, place, and teacher preparation: Improving efforts in teacher education to staff rural schools. *Global Education Review, 3*(1), 108-128. <https://ger.mercy.edu/index.php/ger/article/view/174>
- Burton, M., Brown, K., & Johnson, A. (2013). Storylines about rural teachers in the United States: A narrative analysis of the literature. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 28*(12), 1-18. <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/28-12.pdf>
- Carr, P. J., & Kefalas, M. J. (2009). *Hollowing out the middle: The rural brain drain and what it means for America*. Beacon Press.
- Coladarci, T. (2007). Improving the yield of rural education research: An editor's swan song. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 22*(3). <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/22-3.pdf>
- DeYoung, A.J. (Ed.). (1991). *Rural education: Issues and practice*. Garland.
- Eppley, K. (2009). Rural schools and the highly qualified teacher provision of No Child Left Behind: A critical policy analysis. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 24*(4). <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/24-4.pdf>
- Gagnon, D. J., & Mattingly, M. J. (2015). State policy responses to ensuring excellent educators in rural schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 30*(13), 1-13. <https://jrre.psu.edu/sites/default/files/2019-08/30-13.pdf>
- Gibbs, R. (2000). The challenge ahead for rural schools. *Forum for Applied Research and Public Policy, 15*(1), 82-87.
- Graue, E., Hatch, K., Rao, K., & Oen, D. (2007). The wisdom of class-size reduction. *American Educational Research Journal, 44*(3), 670-700. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207306755>
- Haas, T., & Nachtigal, P. (1998). *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education*. Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.
- Howley, C. B., & Howley, A. (2010). Poverty and school achievement in rural communities: A social-class interpretation. In K.A. Schafft & A.Y. Jackson (Eds.), *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World* (pp. 34-50). Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Jimerson, L. (2006). *The hobbit effect: Why small works in public schools*. Arlington, VA: The Rural School and Community Trust. <http://www.ruraledu.org/articles.php?id=2026>

- Little, J. & Austin, P. (1996). Women and the rural idyll. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 12(2), 101-111. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(96\)00004-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(96)00004-6)
- McHenry, E., & Schafft, K. A. (2014). 'Make my day, shoot a teacher': Tactics of inclusion and exclusion, and the contestation of community in a rural school-community conflict. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19(7), 733-747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.964571>
- Mattingly, M. J., Johnson, K. M., & Schaefer, A. (2011). *More poor kids in more poor places: Children increasingly live where poverty persists*. (Carsey Issue Brief No. 38), <https://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=carsey>
- Miller, L. C. (2012). Situating the rural teacher labor market in the broader context: A descriptive analysis of market dynamics in New York state. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 27(13), 1-31. <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/27-13.pdf>
- Preston, J. P. (2013). Community involvement in school: Social relationships in a bedroom community. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue Canadienne De l'éducation*, 36(3), 413-437. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rc/article/view/899>
- Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., Coleman, M.M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., and Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of Education in Rural America* (NCES 2007-040). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007040.pdf>
- Slack, T. (2010). Working poverty across the metro-nonmetro divide: A quarter century perspective, 1979-2003. *Rural Sociology*, 75(3), 363-387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1549-0831.2010.00020.x>
- Stern, J. (1994). The condition of education in rural schools. *Office of Educational Research and Improvement*. U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED371935.pdf>
- Theobald, P., & Wood, K. (2010). Learning to be rural: Identity lessons from history, schooling, and the U.S. corporate media. In K.A. Schafft & A.Y. Jackson (Eds.), *Rural Education for the Twenty-First Century: Identity, Place, and Community in a Globalizing World* (pp. 17-33). Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Thiede, B. C., Lichter, D. T., & Slack, T. (2018). Working, but poor: The good life in rural America? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 59, 183-193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.02.007>
- United States Census Bureau. (2018, July 1). State & county quickfacts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>
- White, S. & Reid, J. (2008). Placing teachers? Sustaining rural schooling through place-consciousness in teacher education. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 23(7). <http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/23-7.pdf>
- Wright, K. A. (2008). Reenergizing small communities: A vital role for rural schools. *The Educational Forum*, 71(4), 345-360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720709335024>
- Yarrow, A., Ballantyne, R., Hansford, B., Herschell, P., & Millwater, J. (1999). Teaching in rural and remote schools: A literature review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 15(1), 1-13. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X\(98\)00036-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-051X(98)00036-5)
- Zahorik, J. A. (1999). Reducing class size leads to individualized instruction. *Educational Leadership*, 57(1). 50-53.

Author:

Jessica Gallo is Assistant Professor of English Education in the College of Education at University of Nevada, Reno. Contact: jgallo@unr.edu

Suggested Citation:

Gallo, J. (2020). Against the grain: Narratives of rural teachers' professional lives. *The Rural Educator*, 41(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i2.862>

© 2020. This work is licensed under a CC BY 4.0 license. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/>