# There's Land between Us: Rurality in the Northern Great Plains

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*While there is a significant body of educational literature addressing the character and needs of rural communities in the Appalachian and southern regions of the US, there is a need for a better understanding of rural communities outside of this region. Existing literature focused on US rurality revolves around four main themes: the rural idyllic, isolation and deficits, rural identity, and community. The voices, experiences, and needs of future teachers of the Northern Great Plains are missing from this dominant narrative and this study begins to address this gap. This qualitative study is based on data collected from 16 semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in a pre-service teacher preparation program about their experiences growing up and living in rural Northern Plains communities. Interview transcripts were transcribed, coded, and compared to the themes of the existing literature. The analysis resulted in several stable themes similar to the prevailing narratives on rural communities, with specific and nuanced differences. Specifically, participants held a nostalgic rather than idyllic view of their communities, internalized an agrarian identity even if they did not lead an agrarian lifestyle, and described communal ties as essential to their distinct lifestyle. Future research on Northern Plains rurality should seek to include non-white and Native American participants and perspectives.*

*An acre to them is a whole lot different than an acre to us out here. -Mason, elementary and special education major*

The dearth of new and engaging research on rural communities and rural education is well documented (e.g., Burton et al., 2013; Hodges et al., 2013; Manly et al., 2020). However, not all research deficits are equal. There is a relatively large sample of research on Appalachian rural communities (e.g., Azano & Stewart, 2016; Hendrickson, 2012; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018), Southern U.S. rural communities (e.g., Blinn-Pike, 2008; Hodges et al., 2013), and rurality in Australia (e.g., Gottschall, 2014; White & Kline, 2012). Within the U.S., the Upper Midwest is considered to be a research desert (Thier et al., 2021) and there is almost no documented educational research on rural communities and teacher candidates in the rural Northern Great Plains. According to the U.S. federal government (2021), Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming are included in the Northern Plains and this study is focused on the nature of rurality in this region.

The purpose of this research is to attempt to fill this research gap and learn more about the specifics of place in the Northern Plains that makes it both similar and unique to existing literature and understandings of rural communities in the U.S. Gallo (2020) and Gallo and Beckman (2016) called for a deeper understanding of rural communities to help provide a more equitable education for all. We

hope by focusing on people who grew up in the rural communities of the Northern Plains, we will begin to fill this gap for our students and communities.

The two distinct aims of this research are to 1) seek clarity and understanding as to what makes rurality in the Northern Plains distinct from other areas of the U.S., and 2) what effect that has on teacher preparation in these rural areas in regard to curriculum and pedagogy. This paper addresses the former issue by comparing and contrasting existing literature on rural communities in the U.S. to the lived experiences of people who grew up and plan to teach in rural communities of the Northern Plains. The second overall aim will be addressed in a forthcoming paper delving further into teacher preparation, curriculum, and pedagogy.

## Literature Review

The four most dominant themes in the existing educational literature describing people from rural communities in the U.S. are the idyllic trope, isolation and deficits, being and identity, and community. While each theme is present and most likely based on evidence, context and nuance play a vital role in creating a more thorough understanding of U.S. rural communities outside of the Appalachian region and the South. All of these themes are interrelated and threaded throughout the current discourse, but separated in this section to attempt to better describe the lived experiences of rural people in the U.S. The studies included in this literature

review include samples of pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, secondary students, and administrators from the Appalachian region, southern U.S., Southwestern U.S., and the Midwest. When taken together, this diversity of sites and samples contributes to the prevailing narratives on rurality and education.

## The Rural Idyllic

The idyllic trope commonly seen in the discourse on U.S. rurality is perhaps best described by Azano and Stewart (2016) as the "Pollyanna view of rurality" (p. 115). Not only is this theme common in the current literature, but also found in television and movies (Gottschall, 2014). The main idea of the idyllic trope is that the natural scenery, tight-knit communities, and genuine people will offset the lack of resources within these communities. Tran et al. (2020) identified a family-oriented, strong community as one of the advantages to working and living in rural communities. Embedded within this narrative is the view that the benefits of living in rural communities outweigh the economic shortfalls (Gallo, 2020). Perhaps the underlying implication is that rural people of solid moral fiber have the grit to overcome any deficit with hard work. Of course, the issue with the idyllic trope is that it glosses over and does not provide a full picture of the complexities of rural life and makes challenges and social problems more difficult to address (Azano & Stewart, 2016; Larson & Dearmont, 2002).

## Isolation and Deficits

On the other end of the spectrum and somewhat contradictory to the rural idyllic is the deficit and isolation theme present in current research of rural U.S. communities. It is well-established in the literature that resources are more limited in rural communities (Azano et al., 2014; Morton et al., 2018) as well as rurality being presented as an obstacle or a problem (Burton et al., 2013). Specifically, many commodity-based communities and economies are more susceptible to the booms and busts of the economy (Jaffe & Gertler, 2017). The isolation of rural communities and rural professionals is an extension of the deficit paradigm. In educational research, this often manifests as the lone wolf, one-person departments, and professionally and culturally isolated teachers (Azano et al., 2014; Gagnon, 2016; Johnston et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2020). Additionally, Blinn-Pike (2008) described a perception that this isolation insulates young rural people from what are generally considered to be urban problems, like "gang violence, drive-by shootings, hard drugs, and

crime" (Champion & Kelly, 2002, p. 191). The main challenges associated with rural communities are related to limited economic opportunities, higher and more persistent rates of poverty, and higher suicide rates (Jaffe & Gertler, 2017; Ringgenberg et al., 2018). Similar to the idyllic trope, the inherent concern with the deficit mindset in this context is that it centers the negatives of rural communities and makes it more difficult to understand rurality as a distinct cultural and societal setting (Burton et al., 2013).

## Identity and Ways of Being

The third common theme in current scholarship on U.S. rurality is the rural identity and ways of being in rural areas. Within this identity, family, faith, and community (Blinn-Pike, 2008; Burton et al., 2013; Larson & Dearmont, 2002; Stone, 2018) stand out as the defining ties that bind rural people together and to their community. Burton et al. (2013) found agrarian lifestyles and homogeneity of the culture as unique characteristics of rural communities. In describing the people, Blinn-Pike (2008) used terms like neighborly and traditional as cultural markers and Larson and Dearmont (2002) posited a positive identification with rural communities as positively affecting childhood resiliency. Implicit in this theme is the idea of close, supportive communities in rural areas and their effect on the character of these areas.

## Community and Land

While community is heavily threaded throughout the current research on rural communities in the U.S. and abroad, the specific role of community ties should be considered separately for the purposes of this study. Typically, rurality is described in comparison to more populated areas (Manly et al., 2020) and familiarity with seemingly the entire population of the area (Morton et al., 2018). The connection to place is also a strong cultural marker for rural populations (Eppley, 2009). Community ties are not only positively associated with social capital and educational aspirations (Morton et al., 2018), but also are important to professionals working in rural communities (Larson & Dearmont, 2002; Seelig & McCabe, 2021). This is not to claim the positives of community identity are unique to rural areas or that urban and suburban areas do not have or benefit from strong community ties.

Within the current literature on rural communities, Thier et al. (2021) analyzed over 500 studies and found that most studies "provide readers with no sense of what makes a place rural" (p. 2). We

postulate the main themes of current research on rural communities and their descriptions are the idyllic trope, isolation and deficits, identity and being, and community ties. Our aim through data collection was to determine the transferability of these themes to the distinctness of rural communities in the Northern Plains.

## Methodology

Seventeen interviews were conducted with participants who self-identified as rural and were enrolled in a teacher preparation program in the Northern Plains. One interview was not included in this sample because even though they were attending a postsecondary school in the Northern Plains, they were born and raised outside of the Northern Plains. The research took place both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, but this seems to have had a minimal impact on the study. The procedures were developed not to universalize the Northern Plains rural experience, but to deepen understanding of the lived experience in the region.

### Participants

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling (Maxwell, 2013) were used to select participants for this study. Participants were pre-service teacher education candidates who self-identified as rural. All participants were known to the researchers and self-selected to determine eligibility. The participants were at various stages of their teacher preparation program and included elementary education (ELED), secondary education, and Special Education (SPED) majors.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 55 years old and were raised in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wyoming. Of the 16 participants, 14 were female and 14 identified as white or Caucasian—though not the same 14, and the two non-white participants were female. Pseudonyms are used when referencing individual responses. Though all participants were all from rural areas, the context of their lived experiences varied. All participants grew up in, and most currently still live in, areas known for natural resource development—either through farming, ranching, or mining—or in small rural towns in the Northern Plains. The participants who self-identified as townspeople grew up in families who were involved in public service, education, and private business.

While there is no intention to claim this sample is wholly representative of the entire region, the sample is not dissimilar in terms of race and gender to the region's general population and practicing teachers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), the population of Northern Plains states ranges from 84.2%–92.4% white and the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) reported that teachers in Northern Plains states ranged from 92.9%–97.8% white. Further, 89.7% of rural public school teachers and 93.8% of rural private school teachers in the region are white. The U.S. Department of Education (2020) reported that 76% of all K–12 teachers were female, including 89% of elementary teachers. The study population is 87.5% white and 87.5% female, so demographically, there are significant similarities to the general population of Northern Plains states as well as the region's practicing teachers.

### Data Collection

As Brinkmann (2018) noted, the interview has been naturalized as a qualitative research approach and the semi-structured interview offers the greatest potential for both the interviewer and interviewee to accomplish their goals. Semi-structured interviews are made up of open-ended questions developed thematically and with the flexibility to explore areas of interest that arise during the interview. Knott et al. (2022) identified the semi-structured interview as "well-suited to gaining a deeper insight into people's experiences" (p. 1). With this guidance, seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted between September 2020 and March 2021 and sixteen of the interviews are included in this sample. Interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded, and transcribed resulting in 286 pages of transcripts. Instructions were provided to participants on how to access the Zoom interview and care was taken to ensure confidentiality during the interview with both interviewer and interviewee comfortable and alone during the recording.

The typical interview lasted between 30-45 minutes and consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to learn more about their lived experiences growing up in rural areas in the Northern Plains and attending rural P-12 schools. The questions related to this data set asked students to: define rural, place themselves within their conception of rural, describe experiences and characteristics they relate to rurality, how they perceive non-rural students, how they believe non-rural students perceive them, and think about the future of their rural communities. The initial questions and all follow-up questions were designed to elicit material descriptions of participant's experiences and to understand how they have experienced the concept of rural, closely aligned with Brinkmann's (2018) description of a constructivist conception of interviews. Based on participant responses, the researchers asked follow-

up or clarifying questions yielding valuable data, similar to depth-probing as described by Glesne (2011). For example, politics in rural communities was not explicitly addressed in the initial questions, but came up repeatedly in interviews resulting in a stable, consistent theme throughout data collection and analysis. Researchers also took observational notes (Stokes, 2013) during the interviews to record initial thoughts on participant responses and were used to contextualize participant responses and as a beginning point to coding transcripts. There was not a predetermined number of interviews, rather the researchers sought a saturation point (Abma & Widdershoven, 2011) where adding more data would not change or alter the existing data or new questions outside of the original questions would be needed to gain more data. That saturation point was reached after 16 interviews over seven months.

### Data Analysis

Individually, transcripts were read and coded using open coding (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015) and tentative codes were developed. The frequency of occurrence within the transcript corpus was initially tracked, but was not a determining factor in reducing or combining codes. Once the initial coding was completed, the researchers worked collaboratively to find similarities and connections (Hendrickson, 2012) and moved into the focused coding phase "to determine how resilient the codes are in the bigger picture that emerges from the analysis" (Mertens, 2015, p. 440). This phase included sharing initial coding documents, discussing the rationale and supporting evidence for the codes, and combining and reducing the number of themes.

Validity measures included four distinct, purposeful actions. First, interviews were transcribed verbatim (Maxwell, 2013) so data reflected exactly what was said by the participant to lessen the influence of researcher perceptions. Second, member checking (Mertens, 2015) was implemented where participants reviewed a transcript of their interview and were asked to add, delete, or clarify to ensure the transcripts reflected their thoughts and ideas clearly and in context. Only the member-checked transcripts were included in the transcript corpus. Third, since the researchers and participants had established teacher-student relationships, power and hierarchy (Glesne, 2011) were addressed by ensuring participants knew their participation in the interview was optional and the established relationships would not be impacted by their participation or any answer they gave during the interview. Finally, member reflections (Tracy, 2010) were employed where a convenience sample of 4 participants were provided initial drafts of the results and discussion sections to confirm they reflected their lived experiences.

### Results

The themes that emerged from the interview data aligned closely with the themes in the existing literature. There were nuanced versions of similar themes with some particularities that set these participants' lived experience apart from those that comprise the majority of existing scholarship. Just as the themes in current research are interwoven and difficult to disentangle, the emergent themes in this data set are equally difficult to isolate. However, the strong community ties and homogeneity of the sample seem to be present in the Northern Plains as well as other areas of the rural U.S. While the participants in this study are all pre-service teachers, unlike the bulk of the existing rural education literature, their experiences of growing up in the rural Northern Plains is a valuable contribution to the existing rural education scholarship. Given that so little has yet to been studied and written about that is specific to education in the Northern Plains, these narratives can serve as a baseline to which the existing prevailing narratives of education and rurality can be compared.

### Idyllic Trope

The idyllic trope is present within the data, but the participants were careful to identify the various forms of rural communities in the Northern Plains. The idyllic trope was most obvious when discussing the character of rural people. Rural people in this area were described as trustworthy, helpful, and perhaps most importantly, resourceful. The connections to rural communities and people derive from their personal characteristics in that hardworking, neighborly people help each other without expecting anything in return. Several participants described culturally bonding through driving around, drinking, boating, and other outdoor activities like hunting, fishing, and skiing.

### Rural Communities are not a Monolith

Generally, participants delineated three types of rural communities, with the first two being based on natural resources: agrarian communities—organized around ranching and farming—and those based around mining and oil production. The third type of rural consisted of self-described regular town people who identified with ruralness, even though their families had non-agrarian jobs like educators, town planners, and service workers. The essence of rurality in the Northern Plains seems to revolve around

agrarian communities. Though not all participants lived the agrarian lifestyle, they all identified with the defining characteristics.

Generalizing the lived experience of the idyllic rural depends on the homogeneity of these participants, though they were careful not to speak for all rural communities and people of the Northern Plains and attempted to contextualize their experiences based on their broader communities. When asked how they would consider themselves to be rural, Brooks, an art education major from South Dakota, said, "it depends on what kind of rural area" and "rural always seemed like a relative term." Hayden, a SPED major, realized the non-universality of rural when they said "I'm not familiar with rural in other places." While participants were eager to share their lived experiences during the interviews, they seemed well aware they could not speak for everyone who grew up rural in the Northern Plains with Brooks emphasizing, "it's hard to make generalizations about rural areas."

Distance is both a defining characteristic as well as a desirable aspect of rural living in the Northern Plains. Reese, an ELED major from South Dakota, described their living situation as "three miles from the next fence line any which way to neighbors. Our closest neighbors is probably four miles away" and one reason that is desirable is they want their children "not bound to a yard."

**Non-idyllic**

While all of the participants implied or outright stated their love of and nostalgia for rural communities, several addressed negatives associated with their rural communities. In particular, Quinn, a secondary art education major, described their hometown's history with racially discriminatory groups and believed their community was perhaps resistant to change, particularly cultural change. Darby, a SPED major, moved from a rural town to an urban city after high school and wondered if the people from their hometown were checking in to be supportive or because they wanted to share gossip. Saylor, an ELED major from Wyoming, discussed how integration into an isolated, rural community could be difficult and largely dependent on your contributions, while Darby described a family member who did not grow up in their small town never feeling like they were welcomed despite marrying a local.

**An Uncertain Future**

The vast majority of the sample expected to remain in rural communities throughout their

adulthood, so the future of rural communities is a significant concern for them. There was a substantial mix of sentiments, sometimes contrasting, revolving around the economic and cultural future of their rural communities. Since most of these communities are dependent on natural resource development, commodity prices and changes to energy policy would potentially have a considerable effect on their communities and well-being. Culturally, the politicization of the urban-rural divide and in-migration were also concerns.

One of the main concerns described by Brooks and Mason, a SPED/ELED double major from South Dakota, was the growth of agribusiness and commercial farms and ranches. Brooks worried about small rural towns disappearing with the expansion of larger commercial farming operations and Mason, who was already seeing these effects, said medium to large family ranches are "one of those things that's slowly dwindling." Similarly, Hayden, who was from a mining town, felt the economy would always determine the viability of their town. Though several participants feared fewer opportunities, Dalton, a middle school science major, saw an opportunity for growth in small towns through increased access to broadband internet and local schools having the ability to do more online classes in areas where there may not be a local teacher available.

Culturally, the main theme was sustainable growth. Drew, an ELED major from South Dakota, feared that an influx of new people, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, would transform their small town to an urban center. Parker, an ELED major from South Dakota, added they "don't want a Target or a Wal-Mart" to come in and drive local businesses out. Generally, the implication is that while tourism alleviates some of the tax burden, the character of the town and access for the local population needs to be considered and protected. There seemed to be an implied nostalgia for what their communities would become with growth and the negative impacts of transitioning into a larger town or city, both economically and culturally. As Drew stated, "a lot of the ideals we hold are really starting to get attacked."

**Isolations and Deficits**

Participants addressed the isolation and deficits associated with rural communities in diverse ways. They were well aware of how they and their communities were viewed in the non-rural mind, but they did not characterize these views as deficits. However, there was a recognition that physical isolation from non-rural areas impacted their current views and understandings of the broader world. The

picture that emerged was one of stereotypes, awareness of stereotypes, and the tendency to go to extremes when discussing differences. Several participants had experience living in both settings and their experiences were helpful in gaining a balanced view of the perceptions.

Regarding limited resources, Saylor understood and agreed with the idea that rural communities had more limited access to commercial goods, but believed farmers and ranchers were able to engineer more creative ways to overcome the lack of access to new materials. Parker responded to the idea that it was the lack of talent that caused some people to believe rural areas were less than by saying "not that the talent was limited, but it's kind of like a school where you do multiple jobs" and rural communities are "so much more than [their] limitations."

**"So they can have their burger at McDonald's".** The most stable theme in this data set revolved around rural participants believing they were viewed as less than by their non-rural counterparts. For some participants, whether it be during tourist season in their hometown or when visiting Disneyland, it was a common theme to be asked if they had running water, rode horses and buggies to town, or lived in teepees. Beyond that stereotype, participants felt like they were seen as inferior and naïve because they had less life experience than others. Though none of these participants lacked running water or lived in teepees, several participants acknowledged there was some truth to the lack of broader experiences, but they did not see it as a negative aspect of rurality. In fact, Parker believed the advantages of growing up rural were the freedom to explore, learning to drive at a younger age, and generally being safe and free to walk to playgrounds. Perhaps the most salient point made was by Alex, an ELED major from South Dakota, who believes rural lifestyles are irrelevant to non-rural individuals because they are "just so consumed by town life." Mason echoed this sentiment by saying, "people don't know there's people out there that have to raise cows so they can have their burger at McDonald's." Overall, the invisibility equated to an implied disrespect which resonated with the participants.

Reese, who has experience living in both urban and rural communities, discussed the fact that non-rural communities are largely made up of people who moved to the communities from other areas, mainly for employment opportunities. This contrasts with the sentiment about the generational nature of their rural communities and the long-term attachment to place. However, there was a relative balance in participant views. Charlie, an ELED major from South Dakota,

noted the idea that when two different sets of people know little about each other, they tend toward extremes bordering caricature. Similarly, Mason conceded that rural and non-rural people are both ignorant of the other and the way of life that sustains them. Finally, Dalton believes that both groups have similar experiences in context, and "maybe on both sides, people think the grass is greener."

### Identity and Ways of Being Rural in the Northern Plains

Each of the three types of rural communities in the sample—agrarian, mining and oil-based, and townspeople—have distinct ways of being rural attached to their lifestyles. There were several expected portrayals of rurality as well as novel descriptions of what it means to be rural. The most striking part of the relevant data to this theme is rurality as an identifier. Regardless of their role in the rural economy or their status as a rancher or farmer, all of the participants identified as rural, internalized the identity, and accepted the implications of that identity.

One of the main themes associated with agrarian communities was in generational terms, with ranches and farms being in the same families for generations, even back to the homesteading days. Sam, an ELED major, described knowing each farm and what they raised, and Mason described knowing where each property began and ended. Further, community status seems to increase in proportion to the size of one's farm with Darby describing the legacy and wealth tied to the larger farming families, as well as some expectations that children would remain on the land in adulthood.

Mining and oil-based communities were described as much more transient than multi-generational agrarian communities. Devan, a music education major from North Dakota, described the oil boom in their community as providing for an improved tax base and new additions to their school. Blake, a SPED/ELED double major from North Dakota, described how students who did not want or need college were allowed to learn about the oil business through the Career and Technical Education program at their high school. Each participant who was raised in these oil-based areas described their communities as being welcoming to new families, but it was much different for the students who entered their high schools. As Devan said, "You would get a lot of families rotating into these schools and it was a very different experience for those kids."

The townspeople in these rural communities were described as living in small towns in otherwise rural areas. Neighbors in these small towns would be

right next door and they would be close to grocery stores and gas stations. One theme that emerged from participants who grew up in rural towns is that they identified with the agrarian lifestyle even though they were not ranchers or farmers. Parker, who did not grow up in an agrarian family identified with the lifestyle even though their family "is not that at all." While this was common for townspeople, the idea that one had to *do* rural and being rural involved action was also present in the data. For example, Mason discussed wrestling calves and the notion that anyone who had not done it would not understand. Conversely, Hayden described the feeling of not having lived the rural lifestyle "because…I live in town."

In addition to the economic identities, there was unanimity in the descriptors of these communities in personal, cultural, and political terms. Rural people were described universally as hardworking and driven. Specifically for ranching children, this starts at an early age. Mason had animals in their name at a young age and felt obligated to tend to them. They described being a homebody "because if I leave, I leave 8 cows, I leave 10 horses, I leave goats, I leave a couple of dogs" and they would not shirk that responsibility. Finally, not only do rural people see themselves as having high moral character, they take pride in their character and family name in such a way they do not want to bring shame to their names, especially if they live in an insular community.

Culturally, the people involved in this study reported bonding with others in their rural communities over shared experiences. As discussed earlier, each participant from a ranching community described brandings as a way to tie the community together culturally. Further, in these rural communities, you are expected to maintain multiple roles within the community, like serving on the local school board or the planning and zoning commission when needed. The cultural norm is for community members to not keep score and contribute when and where they are able. The emergent theme in this case is that each person has a stake in the community, and they are expected to lend their expertise and labor when needed.

Within this sample of rural participants, there was consensus in perception of their community's political beliefs. Participants were not asked specific questions related to politics, but in describing their lived experiences in rural communities, all participants who broached their community's politics described them as conservative, Christian, patriotic, pro-American, and middle class. On one end of the spectrum, Drew described this as "cling[ing] to their ideals" and indicated some rural people feel their values are under attack by the broader culture of the

U.S. On the other end of the spectrum, Charlie described the rural people as closed off to new ideas. They said it took them over a decade living in their community to have "lived [t]here long enough to have an opinion." Brooks even described the ostracization of anyone with liberal or non-conservative ideas. Finally, Charlie recognized the urban-rural divide with frustration, saying "I just get frustrated with the mentality of America and the 'us and them' stuff," implying the rural lifestyle is being politicized.

Based on all of the aspects and markers of identity, Dalton said "rural is an attitude as much as anything." One participant, Darby, was conflicted as it relates to their connection to their rural community. They felt like they could always return to their childhood home, but when asked if they saw themselves as rural, responded "I don't, but I wish I did." This indicates that while there is nostalgia and positive identification with a rural Northern Plains upbringing, the rural lifestyle is not something that all participants desire in adulthood.

**Connections to Land and Community**

The most dominant theme throughout this data collection cycle was connections within the rural communities and attachment to the land. Within this attachment to the land was a different concept of distance and time as well as unique descriptions of community. Distance was not viewed as an obstacle, especially in terms of cultivating and maintaining strong community ties.

Several participants explicitly stated their strong connection to place. For example, Quinn described their upbringing as resulting in "a really close connection to place and to the land." Brooks, who has lived in both rural and non-rural communities, had a more practical explanation of the connection to land in that it feeds the local economy and industry, but further compared it to non-rural areas by explaining, "there's this connection to the land that's kind of lost in bigger cities." The attachments to place extend beyond just using the natural resources, and also includes connections to the people and time. Not only is this a connection to place and people in the contemporary sense, but also in personal and historical sense. Dalton described living with "three generations or four generations on the ranch and then their fathers' parents and his grandma all lived in one house a mile and a half away." And Mason discussed the demolition of their family's sod house, one of the last in the state, as a time when their grandfather cried, even though their "grandfather doesn't cry, he is a typical rancher." They went on to explain how they were still on the land of the original

homesteaders who lived there since migrating from Europe. There was also a sense of responsibility for the land and the legacy of the family as tied to the land. According to Darby, farming communities were built over generations and children were expected to "take over that legacy." These connections can develop in the span of a single lifetime as Quinn stated, "longevity has developed my connection with this place." Dalton saw this connection to time and place as a defining characteristic of this sample's definition of rural by saying "Rural means we still have this attitude that people must have had 100 years ago about helping each other, reaching out to each other more."

Despite the distance, many participants believed they still lived in a neighborhood, just one that covers a great deal of land. Mason described knowing everyone within an hour and a half drive and Reese described their neighborhood as anyone within a 100-mile radius. Alex described 30 minutes as a quick drive and having to adjust to proximity when they moved to a small town since "Dairy Queen is like 2 minutes away." Driving stood out as a key marker of these rural communities as both an understood part of the culture and as a recreational activity. Reese lived 36 miles from their high school and Kade, a secondary history major from Minnesota, described having to drive a few hours to get anywhere. The concept of distance and space seem to be dependent on location as well. Mason articulated it like this, "an acre to them [non-rural people] is a whole lot different than an acre to us out here."

With these concepts in mind, participants reified their lived experience in various ways throughout the interviews. The most common concept was rural as home and their community was a central part of their home. Alex said, "rural means home to me…a sense of home and community." While the consensus is that rural transcends place, time, and distance, ranching and farming families heavily identified with community in specific, concrete ways. Whether it be calving or branding season, neighbors, no matter how far away, were essential to their success. As Charlie said, they may help out with "a dozen brandings" each spring. Mason described it as traveling over 100 miles to help with a branding because that is the expectation. The dominant theme that emerged is that distance was not a barrier to community and when someone in the community needed assistance, it was their obligation to help. As Charlie revealed, the rural identity is "a little bit more self-sufficient, [but] you can't do without the help of your neighbors." Sam summed up this theme succinctly, "just because they live far away doesn't mean they're not a community member…There's land between us, [but] there's still a close-knit community."

## Discussion

There were many similarities between the existing literature and the lived experience of this sample of people who grew up and plan to teach in rural communities of the Northern Plains. Similar to existing literature, these participants focused on issues related to community, isolation, common values, and the realities of working in schools with limited resources and high workloads. The differences lie in the specifics. For most of the sample, whether they grew up in an agrarian home or not, they internalized at least some elements of an agrarian lifestyle, but also recognized the distinct challenges facing rural Northern Plains communities.

### Community and Isolation

The main theme that threaded the existing literature and the interview data was community. For these participants, community was vital even though what is considered part of the community can cover a large physical space. While the rugged individualism and personal values and characteristics are important for these participants, it seems clear that one cannot run and manage a ranch or farm without the help of neighbors. The overarching theme with regard to community is the obligation they feel to help neighbors and all community members when needed. This runs the gamut from serving on school boards and participating in municipal governments to helping with brandings each spring.

The isolation of rural agrarian communities seems to be necessary since there is a need for land to raise crops and cattle. As Mason articulated, someone has to tend the cattle that become hamburgers and they need space for that operation. Far from being an obstacle, the isolation or separation of rural lands from their more populated neighboring cities is crucial to the maintenance of their lifestyle. Though the lack of broader life experiences compared to their non-rural counterparts was acknowledged, the corresponding freedoms more than made up for it. In this way, the idyllic trope of overcoming their community's weaknesses through natural scenery and strong community was most evident. What became clear throughout the data analysis is one does not have to be of the agrarian lifestyle to internalize it. The characteristics of the community become the identity of the individual.

### Rural Values and Identity in the Northern Plains

Some rural values seem similar across various types of rural communities. In terms of personal characteristics, this sample echoed many of the values in existing literature: hardworking, driven, and

neighborly. This also extended to established cultural values in terms of conservative politics and traditional views. Though not universal, this sample affirmed the idea that rural communities in the Northern Plains would likely be supportive of conservative political candidates and policies. This is another aspect of rurality in the Northern Plains that differs from many other rural areas in the United States. Vermont, one of the most rural states in the country, is also one of the most politically liberal. Native communities in the Northern Plains consistently vote overwhelmingly for non-Republican candidates, but they but they do not make a significant impact on state politics for various structural reasons. The homogeneity of this sample and of rural populations of the Northern Plains in general seem to ensure these values will remain predominant, despite a belief by some that their values are under attack.

### (Less than) Idyllic Communities

While several aspects of the idyllic trope were present in the interview data, there was a recognition that different types of rural communities operate in different ways and there are some issues with insular communities. Whether it be past racism or a less than inclusive community, this sample seemed to be clear eyed when evaluating and recollecting their lived experience in these communities. The racial and ethnic makeup of this sample seemed to ensure there would be similar experiences and expanding to traditionally marginalized communities would give a counterweight to this narrative. Overall, the participants portrayed a nostalgic view of their rurality rather than an idyllic one. Though the two are related, the nostalgia associated with the idyllic trope was most evident in the discussion of the future of their rural homes. Expansion and population growth along with volatile commodity prices were seen as the most pressing threats to the character of rural Northern Plains communities.

### Effects on Education

The realities of life in the Northern Plains that many of the participants described impact schools in a number of ways, most notably with regard to the finite availability of resources and the instability resulting from the economic boom and bust in areas that are heavily reliant on mining, oil, and tourism. Brooks described the resources in their town as "so incredibly limited" and spoke of students' access educational opportunities, experiences, and technology as "just drastically lower than other places." Although participants identified limited

access to both goods and services in schools, there was also an expectation expressed that educators would therefore do more with less.

### Implications for Educators

Just as teachers in these rural Northern Plains schools might be expected to do just as much as other teachers to but with much with less, teachers were similarly described as doing multiple tasks as part of their teaching jobs. When Parker described being in "a school where you do multiple jobs," it was expressed as a point of pride and not a limitation. However, for teacher educators and new teachers alike, this is a reality that must be acknowledged and reckoned with. Public school teachers in this region are some of the lowest paid teachers in the country, with the starting teacher salaries in Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming all coming in less than the national average (NEA, 2022). The implications of what the participants in this study describe means they will likely commute further and make less money than new teachers in neighboring states. Given the national teacher shortages, especially in high-need fields specialties like SPED, educators and policy makers should take note of the unique supports needed for rural educators to thrive in the communities they serve.

### Conclusion

The participants in this study reflected some of the general themes of the existing literature on US rurality, but the rural Northern Plains communities are distinct in several ways. First, rather than an idyllic view of their upbringing, there was a preemptive nostalgia for the pieces of their communities that would be lost with population growth and expansion. Second, the identity of all participants in this sample were derived directly from the values of agrarian communities, regardless of their direct participation in ranching or farming. Finally, community is not only a significant part of the rural Northern Plains, helping neighbors—regardless of the distance—is essential to the existence of these communities. While the politics of the region tend toward individuality, it is clear these communities revolve around strong communal ties.

### Limitations

This narrative is missing the non-white rural experience in the Northern Plains, specifically Native Americans and the lived experiences of rural communities within reservations. With over 20 American Indian reservations in the region—all in

rural areas, the data would be strengthened by expanding the sample to include the perspectives of those living on tribal lands. This is not to imply that all Native Americans in the region live on reservations, rather they are a significant population of the Northern Plains not captured in the data. Perhaps, the Native experience in the Northern Plains would be best captured in a separate, distinct research design. We are also missing the non-middle class, non-college rural perspective. The literature in which the major themes—the idyllic trope, isolation and deficits, identify and being, and community ties—were identified included a variety of participants, and this study only includes the views of college students enrolled in a teacher preparation program. While we did not ask about their socio-economic status, each participant described what we consider to be a typical middle to upper-middle class experience in the Northern Plains and all viewed a college education as a valuable investment.

### Future Research

Future research should delve deeper into the implications of learning and teaching in the Northern Plains. The next step in this research is to analyze this same dataset to determine the effect of Northern Plains rurality on teacher preparation curriculum and pedagogy. With the large data sample and expansiveness of the interview questions, there is ample data to make connections between this specific rurality and the best ways to prepare teachers to live and work in the rural areas of this region. While data from interviews with the participants in this study will be further analyzed and presented in a future

manuscript that addresses different aspects of life in the Northern Plains, these contributions to the research literature that focus on the people, schools, and communities in this region are merely beginning to scratch the surface of what has been aptly identified as a research desert.

In terms of new research, there is a need to understand the lived experience of practicing teachers in this region to gain a better understanding of their experiences working with the students in this area. Future research should also include participants who are not currently enrolled college students. Additionally, studying the experiences of teachers on Native American reservations is an area that should be considered provided the researchers develop a culturally appropriate research design, build and maintain trust with the local tribal communities, and consider ways in which Native communities have been taken advantage of by past experiences.

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