

TEACHER RETENTION: IN RURAL SCHOOLS NESTED IN LARGE DISTRICTS

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Abstract

Teacher recruitment and retention have been longstanding challenges in rural school districts. Rural schools often fail to attract highly effective teachers (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) due to lower pay, long distances from urban areas, lack of teaching resources, and limited opportunities for professional development (Eddy, 2007; Jean-Marie & Moore, 2004; Monk, 2007; Schmidt, 2004). Large school districts in deep South Texas, where this study took place, are building schools outside the parameters of their cities due to a burgeoning population. This study sought to discover reasons teachers choose to teach in rural schools nested in these large school districts and to identify factors that contribute to their decisions to stay. Findings indicated that teachers were drawn to teach in rural schools in large urban school districts because they felt they could "fit in" and connect with the school personnel and families. Factors contributing to their retention included having: 1) a connection and/or shared experience(s) with their students, some as formerly impoverished students of rural schools themselves, 2) an ethic of caring and an intrinsic desire to make a difference for rural school children, and 3) a willingness to embrace challenges of teaching in rural schools. Implications of these findings will be discussed.

Keywords: rural schools, large districts, challenges, recruitment, retention

Research indicates there are common challenges that small rural school districts face-- especially those in more remote areas that are located considerably further than 25 miles from an urbanized area, and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster. Many school districts are forced to do more with less by consolidating campuses, employing out-of-field teachers, and decreasing course offerings just to teach the basics (Jimerson, 2005). As a result, small rural school districts commonly experience high teacher turnover. Poverty is more prevalent in all rural areas than in urban or suburban areas, and it has been found to span generations (Mattingly, Johnson, Schaefer, 2011; Gagnon, Mattingly, 2015). Many rural school districts are strapped for funding and limited in resources. They feel the pressure of meeting state-mandated accountability requirements that are the same for all districts, regardless of size. Larger districts in the area where this study took place have more access to obtaining state and federal funding due to having large numbers of low socioeconomic status (SES) students, such as Title I funding. This is a disadvantage for smaller school districts with substantially lower enrollments of high need students.

Most small rural districts have fewer students attending college than those from urban or suburban areas (Gagnon, Mattingly, 2015). Universities situated near rural areas do not produce the number of teachers as universities located in metropolitan areas. Therefore, the pool of available teachers to teach in rural areas is smaller than the pool of teachers available to teach in metropolitan areas. Moreover, teacher preparation programs rarely make efforts to expose preservice teachers to rural schools in small school districts in their clinical field experiences. It can be costly for students to travel outside cities and there may be a lack of adequate funding to support travel costs for university supervisors.

Despite these identified challenges, recent studies on rural areas have associated high academic attainment with smaller schools and districts (Hopkins, 2005; Howley & Howley, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010; Redding & Walberg, 2012; Stewart, 2009). Williams (2010) reported that studies over the past 40 years have shown that students in small schools showed equal or higher academic achievement and graduated at a higher rate than students in larger schools. Classes in rural schools tend to be moderately smaller (Monk, 2007). The student-to-teacher ratios are considerably lower in both elementary and secondary rural schools as they enroll fewer students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006).

Context of the Study

This study took place along the Texas-Mexico border in South Texas. This region has been identified as one of the fastest growing regions in the nation for the past few decades as well as one of the poorest areas in the nation (U.S. Department of HUD, 2014; U.S. Census American Fact Finder, 2015). The dramatic growth in population has resulted in the need for school districts in medium-sized towns and cities to expand their services to school-age students who live in the outskirts of their urban local school districts. There are children and adolescents who live in rural areas located 20 miles or more from the town or city. This ongoing growth has resulted in a need to build new schools in the rural areas outside the towns or cities. We were interested in learning more about the teachers who chose to teach in this type of school. We wondered if the recruitment and retention issues that small rural school districts in this area commonly face are similar to the challenges that rural schools nested in larger school districts experience.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to discover reasons teachers choose to teach in rural schools nested in large school districts and to identify factors that contribute to their decisions to stay. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the general demographics of the rural campuses in this study?
2. What draws teachers to teach in rural schools nested in these large school districts?
3. What factors contribute to their decisions to stay at these rural schools nested in large school districts?

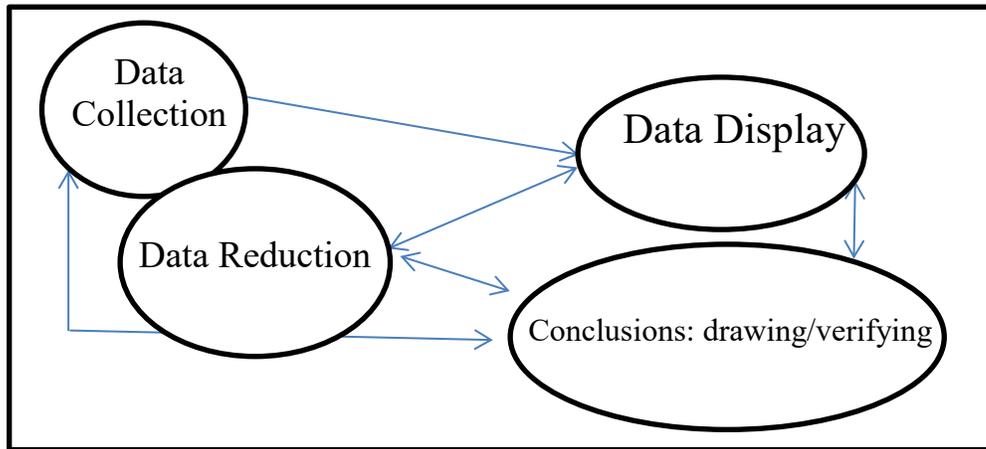
Data Collection

Data collection methods included demographic surveys, focus group interviews, and participant observations. Researchers gained access to two large urban school districts (District A and District B) with rural campuses in South Texas. District A had a population of 29,590 students with 44 campuses with a geographic region of 226 square miles. District B had a population of 34,500 students with 43 campuses covering 56 square miles. Ten teacher participants were selected from each district (n=20). The principals of each campus invited teachers who had a minimum of five years teaching experience from their respective campuses to participate in this study. All were elementary teachers and most were Mexican American.

Data Analysis

The focus of this descriptive study was to describe teachers who worked in rural schools nested in two large rural districts, to discover reasons they chose to take these teaching positions, and perhaps most importantly, the reasons they chose to stay. We used a pragmatic approach (Patton, 1990) to analyzing our study that was informed by ethnography, phenomenology, and LatCrit research. Demographic data about the schools were extracted from the Texas Education Agency 2015-2016 Texas Academic Performance Reports. Qualitative data were analyzed by affixing codes to a set of field notes or interview transcriptions. After data were coded, the Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model was employed in order to verify findings and (Figure 1.) and draw conclusions.

Figure 1: Miles and Huberman’s Interactive Model



Findings

Survey data indicated that during the time that the study took place, the state population of students identified as Hispanic was 52.2%. District A had almost twice the number of Hispanics students as the state average at 99.6%. The state average of economically disadvantaged students was 59.0%. Once again, District A considerably surpassed the state average with 94.2% identified as economically disadvantaged. Striking was the fact that the majority of students, 80.5% at this district, were identified as "at risk", considerably higher than the state average of 50.1%. Students identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) comprised 51.4 % in District A, as compared to the state average of 18.5%. The mobility rate of students at District A was 18.2% as compared to the state average of 16.5%. Having a high mobility rate is also a characteristic of rural families in this area due to job loss and other circumstances.

Table 1

Demographics for 2015-2016: District A

	Total Students	Hispanic	White	English Language Learners	Economically Disadvantaged	At Risk	Mobility Rate
District	29,533	99.6% n=29,410	0.3% n=91	51.4% n=15,166	94.2% n=27,808	80.5% n=23,764	18.2% n=196
State	5,284,253	52.2%	28.5%	18.5%	59.0%	50.1%	16.5%

District B was similar to District A in terms of size of student population and overall composition of the student body. The total student population for District B was 97.2% (n= 33,507) Hispanic, most who were also identified as economically disadvantaged students (85.2%). This is also substantially higher as compared to the state average of 59%. The at-risk population was also higher than the state average of 50.1% at 61.9%. Students identified as English Language Learners comprised 31.9 % in this district compared to the state average of 18.5%.

Table 2

Demographics for 2015-2016: District B

	Total Students	Hispanic	White	English Language Learners	Economically Disadvantaged	At Risk	Mobility Rate
District	34,466	97.2%	1.7%	31.9%	85.2%	61.9%	17.1%
		n=33,507	n=603	n=10,991	n=29,360	n=21,343	n=182
State	5,284,253	52.2%	28.5%	18.5%	59.0%	50.1%	16.5%

This study drew heavily on focus group and fieldnotes data to address the second and third research questions: What draws teachers to teach in rural schools nested in these large school districts? What factors contribute to their decisions to stay at these rural schools nested in large school districts? Four general themes emerged from these data. These included the following: building relationships, valuing support systems, embracing disadvantaged students, and connecting with students. Each of these themes are discussed in what follows.

Building Relationships

The first theme that emerged in the data was described as "building relationships." These relationships included those established with students, parents, and the local community. As one teacher stated, "You build the rapport with the children and there is a certain connection because after them; their siblings follow, and you get to know the family a little bit more. You, more-or- less, know what their needs are and what kind of family environment they live in." Another teacher added, "You know the history or the background [of the students], so I think being in a small community and getting to know the families, you have a better handle [sense] of things [at home]."

The teachers also indicated they had parent meetings which provided opportunities to get to know the parents on a more personal level. The teachers discovered that while working in low socioeconomic areas, parents were very supportive of their children's education. It was obvious that parents cared deeply for their children; however, they expressed frustration that they lacked the academic skills to help them to be successful in school due to their own limited levels of education and language proficiency in English.

Community relationships were established by principals who called on community members or business partners to visit the schools and provide funding for school initiatives. It was common for businesses such as Walmart, Target, and HEB to sponsor school events that gave students incentives to do well in school and to support parental involvement. Examples include: 1) providing prizes for students who have perfect attendance and have excelled academically, and 2) providing prizes for reading and spelling competitions (trophies, pizza parties, gift cards, field trips, bicycles, computers, electronic games, tablets, etc...). These community partners also incentivized and supported parental involvement activities with resources to support classes after school for parents on topics such as nutrition, wellness, parental skills, employment skills, and ESL instruction.

Valuing Support Systems

Teachers described several types of support systems in their schools that reflected an ethic of caring for children and families in poor rural communities. This finding was consistent with most of the students' Mexican American background and home culture which traditionally holds school principals and teachers with high regard and respect (Gonzalez, G.G., 1990). In fact, most of the students in these schools are first generation Mexican Americans, and their families were very humble, respectful, and appreciative.

For these rural school teachers, working with exemplary and experienced school principals was a major factor in their decision to continue to teach at their rural school. Some of the participants stated they stayed on their campuses because of the support they consistently received from the school leaders who invested heavily in their teaching success by providing

curricular resources, training, mentoring, and professional development. A common refrain from teacher participants about the community, the students, and the administration was that they were all "wonderful" to them. The participants felt supported by their school leadership teams and indicated that this support was a critical reason they preferred to teach in economically disadvantaged rural school environments. They all expressed that they felt free to ask one another for assistance.

As one teacher expressed, "every day is a new beginning... because we are accomplishing tasks that other teachers do not want to do." Upon further probing, this comment intended to mean that teachers at the rural schools confront and solve numerous obstacles than their counterparts who teach in more diverse, wealthier schools located in their large districts. The teachers described their love of teaching and close relationships established with other teachers. Consistent among the teacher participants in this study was an early establishment of collegiality from other teachers that were going through the same situations that they were experiencing. This camaraderie amongst peers with varied levels of teaching experience brought them a sense of comfort and support.

A few participants stated that they were hired the same day they interviewed to teach at the school. Other participants were contacted and offered the job to teach the day after they interviewed. For some participants, this was their first job, and they decided to work at the rural campus because they believed the students would be more respectful than students in more urban settings, and they believed that students needed them as positive role models. One teacher said, "Administration, teachers, and family are important, so when we have something to say, the administration will listen and will actually let us be part in trying things out." Another participant added that "without the support of administrators, we would have a hard time being successful." This theme emphasized the significance of supportive leadership and collegiality as critical systems of support for recruitment and retention of teachers in small rural schools located in large school districts. Principals had a bottom-up approach of leadership and preferred to figure out solutions to issues collaboratively with input from their teachers.

Embracing At-Risk Students

As Table 1 and Table 2 indicate, a large percentage of the students enrolled in these school districts are identified as Hispanic and at-risk, who have encountered many challenges. They come from economically disadvantaged homes, and a large percentage are ELLs. The educational achievement of the parents is low overall, as some parents do not have formal schooling, while others did not complete middle or high school. Many of these students face challenges and teachers display strong advocacy for them.

For example, one participant said, "It is hard at times because of the needs of the students and the limited resources they have, but we begin to understand [the children], and things turn around. We find ways to work with the students." Another teacher added, "Sometimes we inspire our students to strive to do well in school for a better quality of life in the future."

Most of the students are in the same situation because they come from very similar backgrounds. Another teacher added, "When you are poor and everyone is poor, you don't know the difference. It's about being happy with what you have. I enjoy teaching these students and welcome them in my classes because they are so humble and grateful."

The teachers stated that the resources the students lacked made a significant impact on the schools' staff. The poverty surrounding them made it hard for the parents to provide the essential items their children needed for school. Teachers got creative and stretched the resources as much as they could. The teachers bought students small bonus gifts such as educational card games and board games. One teacher stated that "... when a parent had to make a choice between buying a notebook and buying food, their choice was to feed the family." The teachers could see that students were grateful for all they receive at school. For these reasons, it was apparent that teachers embraced what their students brought to the classroom and looked forward to teaching them every day.

Connecting with Students

Connecting with students was another emergent theme in this study. Teachers revealed that in the first few weeks of school, they establish relationships with their students. Once it was apparent to students that they were safe and comfortable with their teachers, they were more accepting and respectful to the teachers. As previously stated, all teachers in this study could definitely connect to their students on some level. Teachers stated that students tended to gravitate to them once that level of trust was established.

However, a few teachers had deeper connections to impoverished students as they, too, had experienced some of the

hardships that their students live every day. As one teacher participant shared with us, "I love the kids; I know what they have gone through. I know what it is like to swim across the river and have no any idea where you are going to have your next meal. I choose to stay at this campus because they are reflections of me."

The teachers could also relate to the students because they came from the same types of family and cultural backgrounds. Their stories were told throughout the interviews, as the connection they felt with the students were the same struggles they encountered as young students. Someone connected to them and made a difference in their lives. It was important for the teachers to make that difference in the lives of these children. Teachers added that they could relate to the children because they also attended schools with similar demographics. This common experience motivated them to help the students in any way they could. One teacher added that she was considered economically disadvantaged growing up, and her parents worked in the fields or had some type of hard labor. Her family's background was very valuable and that helped her connect to the children, parents and community. Another teacher added, "I can relate to the environment and to the students as I am bilingual, and I came to the United States when I was in third grade. I did not know any English, so I try to help the students as much as I can because I was that student."

Another teacher shared her feelings as someone who came from Mexico when she was in elementary school. She added, "My family was poor, and I did not have shoes to go to school." She recalled running from tree to tree to cool off. She claimed that she loved working with her students because she knew what they had gone through.

Some teachers expressed that by teaching in rural schools, they found ways to connect and help the students. They were not just teachers. They also took on the roles of being the students' nurses, mothers, and counselors at school. Another teacher voiced, "I am not from this community; I'm not even from this state, but I've been here for a while, and I've been able to make a connection with the students and their parents. These kids are economically disadvantaged, and it is hard to get to their level, to their hearts. I feel that it's somehow easy, but hard at the same time, to help this population."

Conclusions and Implications

Most teachers in the U.S. desire to teach in school districts that are similar to the ones they graduated from (Mahan, 2010); however, the need for teachers is not always in areas that are consistent with this common desire. Teacher participants in this study chose to teach in rural schools located in large school districts. They shared their personal stories that shed light on factors that contributed to their decisions to work and stay in rural schools. Findings in this study revealed that teachers who teach in rural schools nested in large school districts had: 1) a connection and/or shared experience(s) with their students, some as formerly impoverished students of rural schools themselves, 2) an ethic of caring and an intrinsic desire to make a difference for rural school children, and 3) a willingness to embrace challenges of teaching in rural schools.

Establishing strong relationships with students, families, teachers and principals was identified as being critically important. Having strong mentoring support to assist rural teachers with instructional support and resources was also identified as imperative to their retention. In addition, having previously lived in a rural place or having had previous experience with rural communities was an additional advantage in establishing connections with students. Teachers in this study made personal connections with their students. Some also had lived in rural communities and experienced poverty as children, so they had deep insight into their lived experiences. Almost all were originally from the region where this study took place and all were Mexican American. The teacher participants revealed a shared ethic of caring and an intrinsic desire to make a difference in the lives of their students. They were natural advocates for their students and strived to "inspire" and "make a difference" in their students' lives.

Although this qualitative study has several limitations including small number of participants (n=20), time, method, and place, it yielded significant findings and has implications for principal and teacher preparation. As more rural communities located on the fringes of large urban communities perpetuate the need for large school districts to build new rural schools, and as more small rural schools consolidate with larger urban districts, this study can provide guidance for principals who experience challenges with recruitment and retention of teachers in their rural schools.

In this study, principals made intentional decisions to create strong teacher support systems. Their teachers described their leadership and "supportive leadership" that sought out teacher input and collaboration. Teachers were appreciative of principals that valued their ideas and gave them opportunities to engage in decision-making collaboratively. This kind of leadership has been described as place-conscious capacity building. Leaders, who utilize a place, use a conscious model of

leadership, engage community members in decision making, increase stakeholder capacity and ensure sustainability can prove themselves (Johnson, Thompson & Naugle, 2009.). In addition, the development of teacher leaders who can share their expertises with students, fellow teachers, and administrators' can serve as a teacher retention strategy in rural schools (Franklin, 2012).

Teachers also expressed a realization that they needed each other in order to be effective teachers in rural campuses. There was a natural tendency for teachers to share their personal stories when their students' stories converged with their own. These "testimonios" are very common in the Mexican American culture (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). Since all of the teacher participants were Mexican American teachers of Mexican American students, they shared their stories with their students describing how they overcame hardships and were resilient in overcoming challenges. These teachers were deeply aware of the power and responsibility to advocate for their students and to serve as role models. They tried to establish a family atmosphere in their classes. It was not uncommon to hear teachers refer to their students in terms of endearment that parents commonly use such as "mijo" (son) and "mija" (daughter). This sense of familial community in the classrooms and schools is consistent with traditional Mexican and Mexican American culture of this region in South Texas. Students, the majority being from traditional Mexican American families and many being immigrants from Mexico, are brought up to respect and to trust their teachers. This cultural disposition was identified as being one of the reasons teachers were generally happy with their workplace and it factored into their decisions to stay.

Finally, these findings also have implications for educator preparation programs that normally do not give preservice teachers clinical experiences in rural schools. As more small rural districts merge with large districts, and as more large districts find they must expand into rural areas outside their urban areas, there is an obvious need for preservice teachers to be provided field experiences in these settings. These clinical field experiences should be designed to provide learning opportunities for reflective teaching practices with high need students in rural settings as their needs differ from urban and suburban schools—particularly when most of the students are Hispanic, poor, "at-risk", and ELL. This study can serve as a potential guide for teacher educators and clinical teachers who get placed in rural schools with large populations of Mexican American students.

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