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Factors Influencing Teacher Retention and Attrition in Rural Schools

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study draws on a phenomenological approach and seeks to understand factors influencing teacher retention and attrition in rural school divisions. As well, it highlights the supports rural divisions could implement to improve teacher retention by understanding factors leading to attrition. It is well known the levels of teacher attrition is concerning (Whalen et al., 2019) and retaining quality teachers should be a primary focus for leaders as it improves the quality of education for students (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Khawary & Ali, 2015). Three teachers with varying levels of experience in rural schools were interviewed. Findings suggest the primary reason teachers leave or stay in a rural school is due to a change in their personal life. Other factors associated with retention include strong mentorship programs responsive to the needs of the teacher and an incentive program which also includes incentives for tenured teachers. Findings are important for rural school divisions invested in improving teacher retention and decreasing attrition.

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Factors Influencing Teacher Retention and Attrition in Rural Schools

The high rates of teacher attrition is causing concern worldwide (Whalen et al., 2019). This does not come as a surprise since “teaching has long been seen as an occupation that ‘eats its young’ and in which the beginning of a new teacher’s journey is similar to a ‘make or break,’ ... experience” (Kutsyuruba et al., 2014, p. 3).

While teacher attrition is an issue across Canada, this research will focus on rural schools. Teaching in rural areas is different from teaching in urban areas (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015). The isolated nature of rural schools adds an additional layer for attrition, as challenging work environments become exacerbated when the community and school do not have a clear separation. In addition, due to the “small size of rural districts and schools, teachers often need to teach multiple subjects and possibly multiple grades, sometimes in multigrade, mixed-age classrooms” (Barley, 2009, p. 10). With these additional challenges, teaching in a “rural school should definitely not be interpreted as some sort of ‘second best’ or deficit appointment” (Jenkins & Cornish, p. 14).

Research tends to frame teacher attrition as problematic and concerning. However, attrition is only problematic if the teachers leaving are competent in the position and setting; if they are not meeting the teaching quality standards or are not a good fit for the school, attrition can be a positive. If those teachers who are leaving are the worst teachers, then attrition can be deemed beneficial (Borman & Dowling, 2008). This study perceives attrition as problematic in terms of losing qualified, competent teachers.

This research examines two teachers who left their positions and one teacher who stayed, even though their intention was to leave after one year. Through interviews, the research highlights factors influencing retention and attrition. The results of this study can provide insight for divisions and principals on how to improve teacher retention in their rural schools. The purpose of this qualitative study is to compare factors influencing teacher retention and attrition in rural schools. The following questions were also addressed in this research:

1. What supports could rural school divisions implement to improve teacher retention?
2. What changeable factors lead to attrition of teachers in rural schools?

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this research:

Turnover - “refers to the change in the number of teachers from one year to the next in a particular school setting” (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020, p. 1).

Retention - The term used to describe teachers who choose to remain at the same school.

Attrition - The term used to describe teachers who leave the profession entirely. Attrition also includes migration, which is the movement of teachers from one school to another, either in the same or a different division (Wynn et al., 2007).

Personal Beliefs and Bias

As a teacher who has solely worked in a northern rural school division, I see the impact of teacher turnover on students and staff. I see school progress halted after multiple years of high turnover. A high turnover rate slows the progression of programming, especially in regards to academic interventions. Additionally, consistency of school routines and procedures begins to falter, causing an increase of behaviours due to the inconsistencies.

I believe there are factors regarding teacher attrition in rural schools which cannot be changed or influenced, such as a spouse requiring to relocate for their career or family medical reasons. However, there are many influential or changeable factors a division could alter to improve teacher retention. Some of these may include creating collaborative school environments, developing mentorship programs for new teachers, or providing financial incentives to compensate for the isolated region. If rural schools wish to retain strong teachers, they should reflect and respond to why teachers are leaving.

Literature Review

Darling-Hammond (2003) stated, “Keeping good teachers should be one of the most important agenda items for any school leader” (p. 7). Retaining qualified teachers improves the quality of education for students (Khawary & Ali, 2015). Despite the research and common knowledge of teacher retention being crucial to student learning, there is still an alarmingly high percentage of teacher turnover in schools. Teachers leave positions or the profession for a variety of reasons (Kaden et al., 2016). Some factors which may improve teacher retention and decrease attrition according to the literature include creating a collaborative environment, developing a supportive mentorship program, having involved administrators, and recognizing and responding to the challenges of rural isolation.

Collaborative Environments

Kutsyruba et al. (2019) found “[c]reating a school climate that is inviting, supportive and conducive for new teachers’ learning, development, collaboration and connection is an important aspect of growing well-being and organizational health” (p. 286). What and how teachers teach depends on the “knowledge, skills, and commitments they bring to their teaching” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1013). Positive professional and social relationships with other

teachers allow teachers to feel comfortable talking about their struggles and seeking advice. Teachers appear to be more likely to stay at a school if they have positive relationships with their colleagues (Boyd et al., 2011).

Mentorship Programs

Teachers who lack adequate initial preparation are more likely to leave the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2003). However, school leaders must also realize new teachers are not finished products (Lowe, 2006). When looking at retention of new teachers in minority French and French immersion programs in Manitoba, one factor improving retention was an extensive practicum experience in the final year of the degree and a mentorship program to facilitate new teachers' integration into the profession (Ewart, 2009). It should be noted Ewart used the term retention in terms of remaining in the profession, not necessarily remaining at the same school. Kaden et al. (2016) argued special attention should be paid to induction programs to support teachers new to the profession and help them understand the specific cultural contexts and workings of their schools. Effective mentorship programs can impact beginning teachers in three ways: (a) adjusting to the organization and philosophy of the school, (b) fostering self-confidence and giving encouragement to remain in the district and profession, and (c) allowing new teachers to expand their teaching skills and knowledge (Lowe, 2006).

Involved Leadership

Leadership plays an important role in teacher retention. School leadership can support teachers by building a sense of community, establishing school routines, providing necessary resources, and advocating for the school to stakeholders. From the moment a new teacher signs their contract, leadership should provide as much information about the school and community as possible (Lowe, 2006). This initiates the relationship between leadership and the teacher.

Leadership can help new teachers develop a relationship or connection with the community as well. By spending time helping them find housing or showing them around the community and introducing them, leadership can help the teacher become rooted in a community (Lowe, 2006). “When people talk about being ‘rooted in a community,’ what they really mean is that they have relationships with people outside the school and have found friends or partners they don’t want to leave” (Brenner et al., 2021, p. 17).

Rural Challenges

The isolated nature of rural schools provides an additional challenge for teachers. It can lead to social and professional frustrations, such as difficulties accessing education support services, services supporting teaching and learning, and education role models or mentors (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015). In addition, some rural locations are a long distance away from the nearest large center with services. Teachers from these areas would need to plan their trips and organize funds in advance to purchase supplies from the city (Burton et al., 2013).

Perhaps the largest challenge is creating boundaries between school and community. Community integration separate from the student-body is important for retention, but can be difficult to achieve in reality (Kaden et al., 2016). In a rural setting, personal and community-wide relationships dominate, rather than professional or school-based relationships. Plus, parents expect more personalized relationships and accessibility at most times of the day compared to urban settings (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015).

While the lack of boundaries can be challenging, there are many benefits to small rural communities. Some people thrive on the relationship-dominated nature of teaching in a rural community and seek this environment for their family. They are drawn to rural areas for the natural beauty, opportunities for outdoor recreation, and limited traffic. People recognize smaller

communities allow teachers to get to know students and their families and enjoy more opportunities for autonomy or leadership (Brenner et al., 2021). In rural schools, there are often low student-teacher ratios, close positive student-teacher relationships, more flexible administrative structures, close ties between administrators and teachers, and greater opportunities for cooperation between schools and community (Kearney, 1994).

Summary of Literature Review

The literature clearly found teacher retention is important, as it improves student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Khawary & Ali, 2015; Whalen et al., 2019). Unfortunately, there is still a high teacher turnover rate, especially in rural settings. Therefore, the goal of rural administrators should be to decrease their turnover rate. The literature suggests this can be done by creating a collaborative environment, developing a supportive mentorship program, having involved administrators, and recognizing and responding to the challenges of rural isolation.

When teachers have positive relationships with their colleagues, they are more likely to stay at a school (Boyd et al., 2011). These positive relationships build the foundation for a strong mentorship program. Induction programs support teachers by helping them understand the contexts of their school and the expectations of the profession (Kaden et al., 2016). Leadership of a school sets the tone for the environment at a school. Involved leadership can support the connection to the school and the community. There are many benefits to teaching in smaller, rural settings, but there are also many additional challenges urban teachers do not face. The lack of boundaries between school and community is challenging in rural schools. Parents expect more personalized relationships and accessibility in comparison to urban settings (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015). However, for some teachers, this is a major draw to a smaller rural setting. As well, there are often more opportunities for autonomy or leadership in rural schools (Brenner et

al., 2021) and lower student-teacher ratios, closer student-teacher relationships, and greater opportunities for cooperation between schools and community (Kearney, 1994).

Method

This qualitative study focused on understanding factors influencing teacher retention and attrition in rural schools. The design drew on a phenomenological qualitative approach. I used purposive sampling to select my three participants and conducted a semi-structured interview with them. During the data collection and analysis portion, I used the notes and transcripts to identify themes. The following sections describe the details of the design, respondent group, data collection and analysis procedures, and the trustworthiness and limitations of the study.

Design

This study drew on a phenomenological qualitative approach; it was designed to understand human experiences. The research strove to “uncover participants’ understandings of their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 23) in rural schools. Information was collected through semi-structured interviews.

To elicit good data from interviews, one must ask good questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By asking a variety of types of questions, I was able to get a better understanding of the interviewee’s experiences. The questions included background or demographic, experience, behaviour or feeling, opinion and value, and hypothetical questions. The range of questions allowed me to understand their experiences in rural schools. As they were all semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A), follow-up questions and probes varied to allow for the respondents to fully express their answers.

Respondent Group

I used purposive sampling to select my participants. I had two types of participants; those who left their teaching position (attrition participants) and those who remained in their position (retention participants). The criteria for the attrition participants were: (a) worked in northern Alberta for at least one year, (b) left their position to pursue a position in a larger municipality, (c) willing to speak about their experience in northern Alberta and their larger municipality. The criteria for the retention participation were: (a) worked in northern Alberta for at least five years, (b) did not intend to stay in northern Alberta long term, (c) willing to speak about their experiences in northern Alberta and other municipalities, if applicable. I included one teacher who did not intend to stay and two who left. This would provide data for teacher attrition and retention in northern Alberta.

Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers of varying experience levels of teaching in a northern Alberta school. Finding a colleague who presently works in northern Alberta was not a challenge. To find teachers who left their northern position required conversations with principals and colleagues who nominated teachers who might be willing to participate in the research study. I was able to connect with them over email. Once they agreed to participate, we set up a date and time for a google meet interview.

Jane (pseudonym) has worked in a northern Alberta school for over 15 years and, but came with the intention of staying for one year. Her post-secondary education and practicums were completed in a different province. As a new graduate, she accepted a short-term, full-time contract in a small community. She thought a short-term contract may help her get enough experience to get on the sub list in a larger center. The short-term contract led to a couple of

other short-term contracts in the same small community, which eventually turned into a full-time permanent contract.

Christine (pseudonym) worked in northern Alberta for their first year of teaching before moving to a larger city. Her post-secondary education and practicums were completed in a different province. Christine's partner was moving to Alberta for his job, so she accepted the closest position to his work. After one-year of teaching in a rural community, she was able to apply and receive a job in the same center as her partner.

Anne (pseudonym) came to northern Alberta as an experienced teacher. She taught in Ontario for about five years before teaching overseas. She returned to Ontario and taught for another two years before moving to the Northwest Territories. After a few years in the north, Anne moved to northern Alberta where she taught for four years before moving to a larger city.

Data Collection Procedure

The semi-structured interviews occurred during winter of 2022. I gained consent three separate times for the interviews. First, I had oral consent when the participants agreed to participate in an interview. Second, I emailed an introduction letter (see Appendix B) and consent form (see Appendix C), which was returned and signed. Lastly, I confirmed consent orally in each interview for each portion of the interview. All participants agreed to recording and transcribing the interview, the date for which they could withdraw from the study, and the ethics of the interview process outlined by the University of Alberta. After the interview, a summary of my understandings of the interview and transcripts were sent to the participants for confirmation of the information. Once I received confirmation of the accuracy of the information, I proceeded to the data analysis step.

Data Analysis

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. They were semi-structured to allow for the freedom to gather authentic human experiences. The interview questions were designed to answer the research question and sub-questions. After each interview, I coded the data. Common words and phrases were highlighted and organized. This allowed me to find themes in the data to answer my research questions and sub questions. After identifying themes, I was able to place the data into each theme and synthesize a framework.

Trustworthiness of Data

Ensuring accuracy and validity of the study was a large focus of the research design. Member checks were conducted by sending summaries and transcripts to participants for confirmation of accuracy. This built trust with the participants, which builds trustworthiness of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I discussed my interview questions with colleagues prior to the first official interview. This provided an opportunity to eliminate leading or biased questions. Initially, I included a question directly asking what supports other than the mentorship program the division offered to make the transition easier. From the discussion with my colleagues, we determined this was a leading and biased question. This made an assumption the mentorship program was positive and supportive. I changed the question to be more open-ended by just asking what supports the division provided to make the transition easier. This also allowed me to ask better follow-up questions. Once I had my questions, I completed a practice interview. By completing a practice interview, I was able to see how a question may be more leading or biased than intended. I have a bias towards mentorship programs and teaching in a rural setting. In the practice interview, I found my probing questions regarding the supports to be leading. When the practice respondent

did not mention the mentorship program, my probing question led them to speak about the mentorship program. I recognized this and adjusted my probing questions for further interviews. I made a note on my interview schedule to not bring up the mentorship program unless the respondent first spoke about it.

To increase validity and accuracy, member checks were completed. Transcripts and summaries were sent to the participants for approval prior to using the data in the study. To attend to transferability, two techniques were utilized. First, I provided a rich, thick description of the participants and findings. The findings were contextualized by grounding them in the participants' words. Secondly, I had maximum variation in my sample. All three participants had varying levels of experience in a rural setting, left for different reasons or remained even though the intent was to stay, and had different levels of support offered when they started.

Limitations

It is impossible to remove all bias, validity, and accuracy concerns in qualitative research; to ensure trustworthiness, the researcher must acknowledge the issues and be cognizant of it during the data analysis process. As it is a qualitative study involving human participants, threats still remain to the validity of the data. Teachers are held to a strict code of ethics. Participants could still fear professional repercussions, even without using names of previous or current colleagues, which in turn, would result in limiting the validity of the data.

I acknowledge my own bias as a teacher who has solely taught in northern Alberta. I see the challenges of teaching in northern Alberta on a daily basis. When the participants spoke of the challenges, I did not always probe them to delve deeper in their answers because I felt I knew what they were referring to; however, this may not have been the case. My situation may be very different from theirs, and thus, I should have probed their answers further.

Making Meaning: Findings and Discussion

By coding the interview transcripts, common themes were identified for factors affecting teacher retention and attrition in northern Alberta. According to the interview data, factors influencing attrition include: personal relationships, community-work-life boundaries, and isolated communities; factors influencing retention include: personal relationships and positive professional relationships. Participants offered suggestions for improving teacher retention, including covering moving expenses, giving continuous contracts sooner, and incentives to combat the isolation.

Personal Life Changes

All participants revealed the primary reason for leaving or staying in northern Alberta was due to personal relationship factors. Jane initially came to northern Alberta for a short term contract to gain some experience. However, after a change in her personal life, she decided to stay. While Christine enjoyed working in northern Alberta, her partner's job was the main reason they moved. If it wasn't for the job, they would not have moved. Christine stated, "I did really like working in northern Alberta. And if my partner was not given a promotion, we wouldn't have moved" (Lines 137-139). Anne's factors were two-fold; she was not being offered a permanent contract and it was appearing there was no room to change her personal life. The reason she stayed as long as she did was because of the co-workers.

Jane discussed how the community tried to create a dating service for young lawyers, teachers, and nurses to get them to stay.

Apparently, lawyers and teachers and nurses, if they're new and young, they don't stay. So they try to marry you off. The community tries to marry you up and they try to make sure

you're going to stay. So there were actually some inquiries as to my relationship status to set me up with a, I believe it was, a young lawyer. (Lines 356-360)

Northern Alberta communities see the need for new, young professionals to have a personal connection to the community. If they do not have a family connection, they try to create situations for a personal connection to be made. Christine stated “northern Alberta was beautiful, don’t get me wrong, but I wasn’t attached to the place. It was the people there that made it difficult to leave” (Lines 213-214).

These findings are consistent with the literature. Without a personal connection, the community support will not be enough to retain teachers. If their spouse and family are in the community, they will likely remain even if they have opportunities in a larger center (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010). A personal or familial connection combined with a community connection is found to be a primary reason to stay in a community (Seelig & McCabe, 2021). While the school cannot ethically create a dating service to help encourage a personal tie to the community, they can be involved in creating a community connection. “If school leaders make efforts to provide structured opportunities to enter and engage in both the profession and the local community, they can help reduce some of the stress new teachers face and increase their sense of connectedness” (Brenner et al., 2021, p. 15).

Community-Work-Life Boundaries

In small northern Alberta communities, creating boundaries between work, community, and personal life is a major challenge identified by all participants. Barley (2009) noted teachers should be aware of the nature of small schools in small communities. Due to the smaller numbers of staff in school and the community, everyone is strongly encouraged to take on roles outside of their teaching role. When the participants were asked if they felt pressure to volunteer for

extracurricular activities such as coaching sports teams or run student clubs, Anne responded with “Definitely felt the pressure, but by this time I had been teaching long enough to go ‘No, it’s not on my contract that I must do this.’ But the pressure was there” (Lines 489-490). Even if Anne did not volunteer to coach, there was pressure to watch the teams with the intention of building relationships and showing community spirit.

Creating community-work-life boundaries is a challenge in small communities. Often, it is necessary for teachers to provide services and support each other (Bowman, 2018). If teachers want their own children to have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, someone needs to provide the service. As a teacher who has taught in northern Alberta for multiple years, Jane thinks “it is imperative on senior staff and admin - do not force your first year teachers to do any extracurriculars. I think you have to give permission to your first year teachers to say no” (Lines 1686-1688).

Small communities do not always recognize or respect the hours of a teacher. Teachers can be approached for impromptu parent teacher interviews at all times. The parents expect a more personalized relationship (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015). Community support can be great, but teachers still want personal boundaries. Personal life is not a term that exists in small municipalities; it is community business. Gibson (1994) describes teaching in a rural setting as ‘living in a fishbowl.’ Jane said there are always “people scrutinizing where you are and who you're with far, far more. And I don't think that, I don't know how you can prepare somebody for that. But it can definitely feel very strange” (Line 433-435). Jenkins & Cornish (2015) found some teachers will live in another place from their school’s community if possible, even if only for weekends to help create some distance between school and out-of-school life. However, this

is an additional cost, which is not always possible, and reduces the opportunities for positive interactions with the local community.

Isolated Communities

“To someone from an urban background, even relative isolation can be problematic” (Jenkins & Cornish, 2015, p. 16). New teachers, particularly those who do not have experience living in a rural community, might be influenced by popular media’s representations of rural communities as backward, out-of-touch, or dull (Brenner et al., 2021). This negative prejudice can make it difficult to see the positives of a small community.

In rural communities, people must drive multiple hours in unpredictable weather on roads with no communities or services for long durations to the nearest airport and then continue on their trip via plane. The cost to travel to see family is a large deterrent for people. This isolation from family and friends and the costs associated with traveling to larger communities influence a teacher’s decisions to leave (Barley, 2009). Anne previously worked in a fly-in community in the Northwest Territories, yet her position in northern Alberta “felt even more remote than where [they were] in the Northwest Territories” (Line 137). Both Anne and Christine mentioned how expensive it was to travel to see family.

Mentorship Programs and Professional Relationships

Establishing a mentorship program had mixed reviews from the participants. Anne, as an experienced teacher, thought the mentorship program did not fit her needs. The mentorship program was focused on first year teachers, who required a program with psychological and instruction-related support (Wynn et al., 2007). She needed curriculum support, not time to discuss classroom management practices or the struggles first year teachers face. Anne believed there should be a different form of mentorship program for new and experienced teachers, as

they do not require the same form of support. However, it did help initiate a relationship with her colleagues.

Jane was a strong believer of mentorship programs. “With mentoring programs, educators shift from working in isolation to becoming more team and process oriented, which is a benefit to students” (Bowman, 2018, p. 21). She believed the community created through mentorship programs is essential. Jane saw the mentorship program as a bridge to building a strong professional and, potentially, personal community for teachers.

I think about the new teachers who have come through the building in the last few years. The ones that have stayed are either the ones that came and there were a bunch of new teachers at the same time and they're all sort of still in the community. Or they came and stayed because they had family in the area, or they were from the area. The ones who left were ones who didn't make that type of connection. (Lines 350-354)

It is important for northern school divisions to have mentorship programs to support new staff members and lessen some of the stressors associated with the higher workloads teachers face in northern communities (Bowman, 2018). However, it must be adjusted to the needs of the teachers. For experienced teachers coming into a northern position, it may need to focus less on the instructional support and more on the community and curriculum content support. “Teachers who are members of communities of practice have the opportunity to do a better job when their teaching is connected to other faculty members throughout the school” (Lowe, 2006, p. 28).

Moving Costs

Covering moving expenses could be one incentive to recruit teachers to northern communities. Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf (2010) stated “Northern communities need incentives

for recruiting and retaining teachers to counter the southerly flow of teachers” (p. 871).

According to Lowe (2006):

Offering incentives to teachers has been a successful strategy for some rural school districts. Bonuses and salary increases appear to be the most popular in hiring and retaining new teachers; however, incentives should be available to teachers throughout their tenure with the school district (p. 29)

While the costs of moving to northern Alberta did not prevent any of these teachers from accepting their positions, they all stated it was or would have been helpful. Jane did not receive any compensation for moving expenses, but felt it would have been helpful. Christine thought the moving expenses were a great support, as she was just coming out of university. Anne had a different viewpoint, as not all of the moving expenses were covered. Coming from a position where all of the costs were covered to move to the Northwest Territories, this was a change. “It only offset my cost by two thousand dollars. It cost me about 10 grand to move. Or eight grand. Eight or ten grand to move. Oh and my wages went down. A lot” (Lines 202-203). For Anne, the moving expenses were just a minor support and could have been better.

Kitchenham and Chasteauneuf (2010) found the majority of their respondents think some sort of financial incentive would help attract and retain teachers in northern school districts. Their participants suggested incentives such as a large moving allowance given up front, a signing bonus, paying off a small to medium percentage of student loans, or even new technology incentives for the teacher’s classrooms, such as iPads or laptops.

Permanent Contracts

Both Christine and Anne mentioned offering permanent or continuous contracts sooner may help retain teachers. For Anne, the reason for leaving was because she was not getting a

permanent contract. Christine thought “offering permanents sooner would probably encourage people to stay because where I was, you had to wait two years, but if you are offered a permanent after a year, it's an easy way to set yourself up” (Lines 515-517). Christine also mentioned the city she currently works in offered permanent contracts after one year, which was another selling point. It shows the division is interested in retaining staff.

Providing single year contracts creates a short-term vision of retention, which is problematic for the school and community. It often means teachers view the school as a training ground that can be abandoned once their skills are developed. The teacher benefits individually and the next school they work at benefits, but the first school is left looking for a new teacher to train (Burleigh, 2016).

Summary of Findings

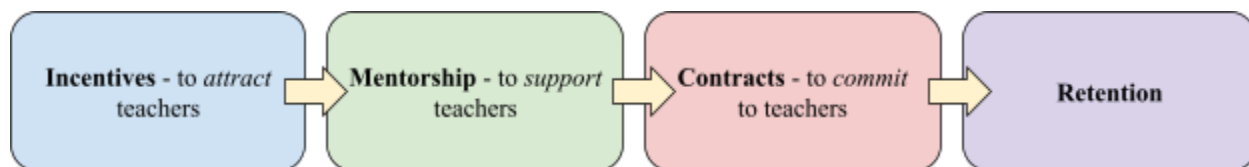
The data collected highlighted the primary factor influencing their decision to stay or leave was a change in their personal life. Finding a partner, following a partner, or feeling there was no possibility of finding a partner was the primary reason to stay or leave the community. While this is a large factor influencing retention and attrition in rural schools, it is not considered a changeable factor. As well, the lack of community-work-life boundaries is difficult to change, especially when it comes to relationships with parents. It is ingrained within a community to have a more personalized or intimate relationship with all members. The community runs on personal connections. This study found three primary changeable factors to improve retention in rural communities: (a) developing a strong mentorship program tailored to the needs of the teacher; (b) providing financial incentives, such as covering moving costs; and (c) offering permanent contracts sooner.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to compare factors influencing teacher retention and attrition in rural schools. The findings could guide school divisions in implementing appropriate supports to decrease attrition or migration within their division. Understanding factors which affect retention and attrition of teachers in rural school divisions can guide the practice of school divisions and, especially, principals. While this research is focused on rural schools, the information can be used for divisions of all sizes who are facing a high turnover rate. Many divisions are creating and implementing policies, such as mentorship programs, in attempts to stem teacher attrition. Yet, without understanding and acknowledging why teachers leave, these approaches may not be effective (Boyd et al., 2011). Acknowledging the challenges of rural school divisions can lead to improving policies and practices. According to the findings in the interviews, a framework of changeable factors to support rural teacher retention was synthesized. This is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Improving Rural Teacher Retention



One of the changeable factors is providing incentives such as covering moving costs. Sometimes, calls for solutions centered around money over-simplifies the problem of teacher retention (Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010). This may help attract new teachers to the community, but may not attend to the retention issue unless there are incentives throughout the teacher's tenure. Lowe (2006) found:

Offering incentives to teachers has been a successful strategy for some rural school districts. Bonuses and salary increases appear to be the most popular in hiring and retaining new teachers; however, incentives should be available to teachers throughout their tenure with the school district. (p. 29)

Attracting and retaining teachers are two separate goals. If the goal is retention, the incentives must continue past the attraction stage.

I recommend an incentive grid to attract and retain teachers. This could include a signing bonus in the form of covering a portion of their moving expenses. Then, there could be a financial bonus every five years or so. This bonus may provide the ability to be able to take an additional trip out of the community and provide a break from the demands of rural life. As well, teachers could choose to forgo the financial bonus for additional personal days with pay. Traveling from a rural community is expensive due to the additional travel, but it is also expensive in terms of time; having the opportunity to create a couple of extra long weekends may provide enough of an incentive for teachers to stay in the community longer.

Another changeable factor is implementing strong mentorship programs to support teachers; this must be responsive to the needs of the new teacher. “The value of developing a structured welcome for new teachers to both the school and the local community cannot be overstated” (Brenner et al., 2021, p. 15). People get connected to other people in their communities, not the physical location. When faced with the choice to leave, it is the people they will or will not struggle to leave. If divisions want to retain teachers, they must focus on the school and community connection. New to the profession or new to the community teachers will require some additional support connecting with the community. A strong mentorship program

focusing on school and community mentorship can lessen some of the stressors associated with working in rural communities (Bowman, 2018).

My recommendation is to have a divisional and school-based level of mentorship programs for incoming teachers. The divisional level mentorship program would focus primarily on new teachers. It would include curricular, assessment, and documentation support. This would also provide an opportunity for other first year teachers to collaborate and discuss the challenges they face. As this research is focused on small, rural communities, it is very plausible to only have one first year teacher in a school. In rural schools, teachers do not have as many colleagues or potential mentors around. They may be the only one of their kind - the only 3rd grade teacher or the only music teacher - and they may need to travel to other schools to find the necessary support (Brenner et al., 2021). This divisional level of support would allow for cross-school collaboration and support. The school-based level of mentorship would be provided for new to the building but experienced teachers, as well as first year teachers. The focus would be on developing collegial relationships, understanding school culture, and day-to-day support. No one wants to work in a school where the environment for teaching and learning is less than positive. This would help create a positive environment where work feels meaningful and purposeful (Lowe, 2006).

The final changeable factor found in this research study was offering permanent contracts after one-year. Permanent contracts allow teachers to feel secure in their career and start securing themselves within a community. Plus, it shows the division is committed to retaining teachers in their schools.

I think creating strong mentorship programs, providing financial incentives, and offering continuous or permanent contracts after one year will help divisions recruit and retain teachers.

However, without a community and personal connection, I believe teachers will still leave a rural setting to seek out these connections. People want to put down roots and feel a sense of community before they call a place a home (Brenner et al., 2021).

Significance of Findings

The contribution to theory is adding new insight to teacher attrition and retention specifically in rural communities. Research is extensive in the area of teacher attrition and retention, but focusing on the additional challenges a rural location provides can add additional insight in the theoretical world.

This study found common themes for teacher retention and attrition in rural schools. Unfortunately, it revealed many unchangeable factors, which will not lead to improving rural teacher retention. Changes in personal life, the isolated nature of the communities, and the lack of community-work- life balance are not preventable. School divisions could provide support for teachers willing to set clear boundaries in their community-work- life balance, but ultimately, that is part of the culture of a small municipality. School divisions could consider providing financial support to offset the additional costs moving to or traveling from isolated communities entails. As well, shifting to a more rapid permanent contract system could entice teachers to stay. However, a change in personal life would take priority to leave or stay over a couple of extra amenities.

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Appendix A

Interview Script and Schedule

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. I've asked you to participate in an interview as I'm looking at factors that affect teacher retention and attrition, in particular, in small, northern Alberta schools and school divisions. As someone who worked in rural northern Alberta and left/who works in northern Alberta, I am interested in your perspectives as to why you left/stayed. Your participation would involve an interview that should last no longer than one hour. If we come to the end of the hour and we are not done, I will give you some options for finishing the interview questions at a later date. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating. Do you consent to this interview?

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will be using a qualitative method. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. Do you consent to this interview being recorded and transcribed?

A couple of notes regarding the interview:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 23, 2022 and I will destroy all data.

- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

I will be following the University of Alberta standards for the protection of Human Research Participants. This involves:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked in my office in a filing cabinet and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Do you have any questions about the research or confidentiality process?

Background:

- Can you tell me about your teaching experience?
- How long have you/did you teach in a northern rural community?

Interview Questions

- What factors led you to move to the northern school district?
- When you started working in your northern community, did you intend to stay? Why or why not?
- What supports did your school division provide to make the transition easier?

- What are some of the challenges you face in a northern school division?
- How important do you feel it is to be connected to your school community and outside community? More or less so in a smaller community? Why?
- In your local community, if someone had a different political opinion from the majority (for example, covid beliefs, 2SLGBTQ+ beliefs) how would they be treated?
- What factors influenced your decision to leave/stay?
- What supports could a rural school division provide to encourage teachers to stay in a northern community?
- What could they do to entice teachers to come in the first place?

Appendix B

Letter of Introduction



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Jeralee Neufeld
jjneufel@ualberta.ca

February 9, 2022

_____ (Participant Name)
 _____ (Participant Address)

Dear <Recipient Name>,

I am a graduate student in the Master of Education in Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta. The purpose of this letter is to you to take part in a research assignment for my EDPS 509 Research Design and Data Analysis course. My assignment is intended to look at the factors influencing teacher retention and attrition in northern Alberta. Your participation would be a one hour semi-structured interview via google meet. Your participation is voluntary; there will be no consequence to you should you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participating.

In order to gather data for my research assignment, I will be conducting semi-structured interviews with three participants who have experience teaching in northern Alberta. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Please note:

- You may choose not to answer any question.
- You may opt out of this research assignment once responses have been submitted. To do so, please submit your request by email by March 26, 2022, and I will destroy all data.
- I will send you a transcription of the interview as well as a summary of the main points I understood you to make by email; you will have the opportunity to verify the accuracy of the transcription and my interpretation of it.

Should any concerns, complaints, or questions arise from your participation, you may contact me or my instructor, Dr. Jose da Costa (jdacosta@ualberta.ca).

Educational Policy Studies

All data will be handled in compliance with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants:

- Participant names will not be revealed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used in all written representations of the data.
- Hard copy data will be locked and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Digital data will be stored on my computer under a secure password-protected system and will be destroyed on my completion of my graduate program.
- Data will be used to complete my EDPS 509 course, my graduate program, and may be used in future presentations and publications in educational contexts.

Thank you for considering this invitation to participate in my research. If you wish to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to jjneufel@ualberta.ca by February 17, 2022. I have included two copies of the consent form: one is to be signed by you and the other is for your own records.

The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, you can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Should you wish a copy of my research findings, I would be pleased to provide one on your request.

Sincerely,

Jeralee Neufeld
Graduate student in the Master of Education in Leadership and Educational Policy Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
jjneufel@ualberta.ca

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

Educational Policy Studies

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E-mail: Jose.da.Costa@ualberta.ca

Appendix C

Adult Participant - Research Consent Form



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

EDPS 509 Research Assignment: Factors Affecting Teacher Retention and Attrition in Northern Alberta

Researcher: Jeralee Neufeld

Date Range of Research: <February 9, 2022 – April 17, 2022

I, _____ (name of participant), hereby consent to participate in the research, Factors Affecting Teacher Retention and Attrition in Northern Alberta.

I understand that my participation includes:

- a one-hour semi-structured interview with Jeralee Neufeld
- the interview will be recorded and transcribed

As per the Letter of Information, I understand that:

- My participation in this research is voluntary.
- I may withdraw from the research without penalty until <March 26, 2022>.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- No identifying information will appear on written representations of the data: pseudonyms or numerical coding will be used to convey the data.
- The data will be used for the purposes of completion of the Master of Education in Educational Studies (MES) program and may be used in future presentations and publications in the educational context.
- The plan for this research has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board 1 at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, I can contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Signature of Participant

Date

University of Alberta Ethics ID# Pro00096710

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