

What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to
teaching in rural settings?

by

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B.S. University of Missouri-Columbia 2007
B.A. University of Missouri-Kansas City 2012
M.S. University of Central Missouri, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

Rural school districts experience disproportionately high teacher attrition due to limited resources, lower salaries, and heightened professional demands. Yet many rural educators remain committed to their roles long-term. This qualitative study examined the factors that contribute to the sustained commitment of rural secondary teachers. Guided by Mason and Matas's Four Capital Theory human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital, the study explored how personal, relational, and organizational influences shape teachers' decisions to stay.

Data were collected through an initial questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with ten rural teachers who had at least three years of experience in their districts. Thematic analysis revealed three primary retention factors: strong relationships with students and colleagues, a deep sense of community belonging, and supportive administrative leadership. Teachers also noted that professional autonomy, adequate resources, and personal resilience contributed to their long-term satisfaction.

Findings highlight the importance of relational and contextual supports in rural education. Recommendations include strengthening school-community partnerships, enhancing professional supports, and cultivating leadership practices that prioritize teacher well-being. Understanding why rural teachers remain can guide districts in improving retention and reducing educational inequities.

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Approved by:

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Dedication

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Chapter 1 - Exploring Rural Teacher Commitment

Introduction

This chapter outlines the need for research into what rural high school teachers attribute to their long-term commitment to remain in the profession. The current educational climate is marked by high teacher attrition, lack of resources, and lack of community involvement (Wood, 2023). Rural districts, in particular, face even higher attrition rates than their urban and suburban counterparts, compounding the challenges these areas face (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). This results in inequities that put students in rural districts who are already disadvantaged at greater risk (Pankratz, 1975, as cited in Azano & Stewart, 2015).

While teacher attrition is a concern nationwide, it disproportionately affects rural districts (Johnson et al., 2021). Rural educators also face significant salary gaps, with teachers in these districts earning, on average, \$3,800 less than their peers in urban or suburban areas (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). Another problem is that rural districts are at a disadvantage because of a clear salary gap that exists in many states for educators (Miles et. al., 2018). As a result, rural students often have less experienced teachers and fewer resources, further widening the achievement gap (Wells et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, teachers who stay in rural districts often cite strong interpersonal relationships with students and colleagues, a sense of support, and deep ties to the community as key reasons for their retention (Leech et al., 2022). Rural schools also offer advantages, such as smaller class sizes, closer relationships, and greater opportunities for involvement in extracurricular activities (Ralph, 2003). For instance, Seelig and McCabe (2021) found that rural teachers appreciated the autonomy and trust from their administration, which contributed to their job satisfaction.

This study seeks to explore what sustains rural teachers to stay in the profession and aims to provide insights that can help these districts retain more teachers, helping to ensure students have experienced, empowered, and dedicated educators in the classroom.

Statement of Problem

Given the constant demand for highly qualified teachers, it is crucial for disadvantaged districts such as rural ones facing high attrition rates to focus on teacher retention (Darling-Hammond & Sikes, 2003). From 2000-2012 the national average of teacher retention in the United States was 85.37% of (Nguyen, 2020). It was found that for high poverty rural districts their regular attrition rate is around 28%, which is nearly double the national average (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). While rural districts may not always appear disadvantaged compared to urban ones, closer examination of attrition rates, salaries, access to technology, and teaching demands reveals significant challenges (Kormos & Wisdom, 2021). Rural teachers face disadvantages due to the lack of economies of scale, which urban and wealthier districts can leverage (Dhaliwal & Bruno, 2021).

Without increasing the number of tenured teachers and having lower pools of candidates in rural areas, these communities will continue to struggle with educational inequities, impacting both students and teachers (Harbatkin, 2022). Issues such as limited internet access further exacerbate the disadvantage (Hunt-Barron et al., 2015). If funding, experienced teachers, and opportunities remain limited in rural districts, students will continue to face significant educational gaps, which is unsustainable in the long term (Washington, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Four Capital Theory, developed by Mason and Matas (2015), as its theoretical framework. The theory, which focuses on factors influencing teacher attrition, is used

to analyze the experiences of tenured rural high school teachers. An introductory questionnaire and then semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the data was coded based on the four categories of capital: human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital. The themes emerging from these interviews informed recommendations for rural school districts on strategies to improve teacher retention.

Significance of the Problem

Every professional owes their success, in part, to the teachers who equipped them with essential critical thinking skills (Alsaleh, 2020). However, regions with high teacher turnover, especially rural areas, face significant educational gaps. These districts and their leaders struggle to retain experienced educators, exacerbating existing disparities (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023). By investing in teacher retention, communities can not only address these gaps but also retain top talent, helping to strengthen local economies.

Starting in the 1970s, Singapore began to transform itself from a collection of swampy fishing villages into an economic powerhouse by building an education system that would ensure every student access to strong teaching, an inquiry curriculum, and cutting-edge technology (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

If rural districts in the U.S. could emulate aspects of Singapore's success, they might reverse current trends, where urban and suburban districts attract teachers over rural ones. However, U.S. education trends currently run counter to Singapore's model, underscoring the importance of understanding what motivates rural teachers to stay. The 2023 *Why Rural Matters Report* highlights the scope of the issue: "More students in the United States attend rural schools than the 100 largest U.S. school districts combined" (Showalter et al., 2023, p. 2). This indicates that a significant portion of the U.S. population faces educational disadvantages, often due to high teacher turnover and limited resources in rural schools.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore why teachers remain committed long term to their current positions in rural schools. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are various factors that contribute to teacher attrition and retention. To identify these factors, the study used a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with teachers in rural schools, which focused on what motivated them and their colleagues to stay. The study targeted teachers with at least three years of rural experience to provide the most insightful responses. The data collected from the questionnaire and interviews were analyzed and transcribed to identify recurring themes. These themes aimed to inform rural school superintendents, administrators, and school boards, helping to strengthen retention strategies. The following sub research questions will guide this investigation:

1. What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural high school teachers' continued commitment to their schools and communities?
2. How do rural school districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?
3. How does four-capital theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) help explain how rural teachers sustain commitment and professional fulfillment over time?

Study Overview

This qualitative study employed an interpretive approach, framed by the Four Capital Theory to explore how various forms of capital shape teachers' experiences and influence their decisions to remain in rural secondary schools. Teachers from rural school districts in the Midwest were recruited through a questionnaire sent to district superintendents. A total of ten

teachers with at least three years of experience in their current roles were interviewed, using purposive sampling to ensure a representative sample. The goal was to reach data saturation the point when “nothing new is needed to be added” (Marshall et al., 2013, p. 11). With a sample size of 10 teachers, they provided enough data to achieve this saturation. This approach captured a range of experiences, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of teacher retention in rural districts.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed by a third-party service, Zoom. The transcriptions were coded, and recurring themes were identified and presented in the findings. The findings addressed the research questions and offers recommendations for rural school superintendents, administrators, and other stakeholders. A timeline for completing the research is outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. *Timeline of Dissertation.*

Date	Study Activities
February 2025	Proposal Defense
March 2025	Kansas State IRB
March-April 2025	Participant Recruitment
April-June 2025	Conducted Interviews
July-November 2025	Data Analysis
December-February 2026	Drafted Chapters 4 and 5
March 2026	Dissertation Defense

Boundaries of the Study: Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

Two limitations may have affected this study. First, a limitation was the possibility that sample respondents did not answer with full candor, which could have led to results that do not accurately reflect the opinions or insights of all members of the population (Cunningham, 2006). Additionally, the limited contact between the researcher and participants, combined with the use

of Zoom for interviews, might have hindered full transparency. While Zoom interviews offered convenience, they did present challenges such as connectivity issues and a lack of non-verbal cues that are available in face-to-face interactions (Oliffe et al., 2021).

The second limitation lies in the use of semi-structured interviews, where questions were adapted based on individual responses. This flexibility resulted in some inconsistencies across interviews, particularly among participants who completed only a single interview, compared to those who had additional time to reflect and provide more detailed responses during a second interview. Additionally, many questions were based on the assumption that all teachers are familiar with school and district policies, as well as the four capitals from Mason and Matas, which may not have been the case for each participant.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study included the recruitment of all participants through a Rural Education Center in the Midwest. Once the school district and teachers were identified, the researcher collaborated with district personnel to contact potential candidates and gauged their interest in participating. Before the questionnaire and interviews, participants received consent forms outlining the study's purpose. Upon agreement, semi-structured interviews were scheduled.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by a third-party service, Zoom. The transcriptions were then coded and organized into themes for presentation in the findings and analysis section. All interviewees were treated equally, and each participant's data held the same weight in the analysis process, and the rationale of the researcher was captured through active analytic memoing. Prior to the questionnaire and interviews, candidates were provided with an

information sheet detailing the study's objectives. Future research considerations were based solely on this study's findings.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are key concepts used in this study, with definitions created specifically for the purposes of this research:

Attrition: The reduction of a workforce due to sickness, death, retirement, or relocation.

Attrition can be both controllable and uncontrollable (Alao & Adeyemo, 2013).

Community: The population within a school and its surrounding area, including those with vested interests and working relationships with the school district (Stefanski, 2016).

Human Capital: The skills, knowledge, and competencies gained through education that enhance job performance (Lanzi, 2007).

Positive Psychological Capital: A state of mind rooted in positive psychology, involving hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience, all of which can be measured and developed (Luthans et al., 2004).

Semi-Structured Interviews: A qualitative research method with a predefined set of questions, allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on interviewees' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Social Capital: The network of relationships and support systems individuals rely on to collaborate and achieve goals (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Stakeholders: Individuals or groups within the school, district, or community who have an interest in influencing decisions and outcomes within the school(s) (Janmaat et al., 2016).

Structural Capital: The resources, processes, and policies available within an organization to support employees in performing their jobs (Hejazi, Ghanbari, & Alipour, 2016).

Relationships: The process of building positive interpersonal connections among students, peers, administrators, and stakeholders, which has shown to enhance outcomes for all involved (Zandvliet, 2014).

Retention: The strategies employed by school districts to support and encourage teachers, ensuring they remain in their roles long-term (Das & Baruah, 2013).

Rural: Communities with populations of fewer than 5,000 people (USDA, 2024).

Positionality

As a current teacher and Ed.D. candidate at Kansas State University, I am deeply invested in understanding teacher attrition, especially in rural districts where the rates remain high. For example, the teacher attrition rate after the 2020-2021 school year increased to 7.3%, up from 6.4% the previous year (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2023). Identifying reasons why some teachers remain in the profession, despite the challenges of rural districts, could reveal strategies to help mitigate the ongoing teacher exodus across the U.S. Having taught for over 14 years, I recognize that my personal experiences as a teacher could influence my perspectives and may have introduced bias in the coding and theme identification process. My initial interests with my research were around examining how to help make a positive impact on retention of teachers, as the number of teachers considering leaving the profession has risen drastically since the Covid-19 pandemic (Maresh, 2024). The initial body of literature examined on teacher retention and attrition prompted a focused interest in the rural educational context, where distinct and often underrepresented challenges uniquely impact school districts. My interest in this study stems from a belief that strong relationships with students, peers, and administrators are key to teacher retention. Understanding these factors in rural districts confirmed my existing views on why educators choose to remain in the profession. Ultimately, to attract and retain highly qualified,

motivated teachers, we must listen to educators and work to replicate the positive experiences that keep them in the field.

Summary

This study aims to explore why teachers remain in their roles despite the challenges they face. Educators with more than three years of experience in their current positions were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. The goal was to identify recurring themes across the questionnaire and interviews and present them in the findings. If successful, this research could contribute to improved educational experiences and outcomes for students in rural areas, while supporting the retention of their teachers.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

The literature highlights the challenges of education in rural school districts while emphasizing the unique benefits that support teacher retention in these settings. It also identifies the four-capital theory as a valuable framework for understanding teacher retention, as it categorizes what educators value into human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital. Overall, this review demonstrates that the attrition and retention of rural educators remains highly relevant and essential to address.

Challenges of Teaching in a Rural District

Historical Background

The challenges and demands faced by rural schools are similar to those of urban and suburban counterparts, including retaining highly qualified teachers (attrition), securing adequate funding, meeting student proficiency standards, and addressing professional development needs (Barley & Beasley, 2007). However, rural school districts often experience higher rates of attrition, limited access to technology, inconsistencies in professional development, and lower student performance (Yan, 2006). While the factors contributing to these challenges have been extensively researched, there is comparatively less research on why tenured teachers in rural schools choose to remain in their roles. Key factors such as pay rates, teacher preparedness through professional development, and student performance and motivation are significant indicators of lower-performing rural schools, which often experience higher attrition rates (Miller, 2019). Additionally, teachers in rural schools have historically been paid significantly less than their non-rural counterparts, reflecting broader trends of lower salaries in teaching compared to other degree-requiring professions (Jimerson, 2003).

Salary Schedule

Teachers in rural districts have historically faced lower salaries, a trend that continues today. Showalter et al. (2023) reported, “the adjusted U.S. average salary for teachers in rural districts is \$76,374 a promising jump from the \$69,797 four years prior, but still substantially lower than the \$81,645 average for non-rural districts” (p. 11). While a \$5,271 difference on average may not seem significant, it could meaningfully impact teachers' quality of life. Those at the higher end of the salary scale may manage solely on their teaching income, but those at the lower end often face tough financial choices. Showalter et al. (2023) further highlighted the disparity in Missouri, where rural teachers earn nearly \$14,000 less (adjusted) than their peers in other states, with only Arkansas paying teachers less (p. 21). This regional disparity makes teachers in the South and Midwest particularly vulnerable to leaving their districts or seeking other employment if they struggle to make ends meet.

Salary is undoubtedly a critical factor in teacher retention. Frahm and Cianca (2021) found that “lower salaries and less lucrative benefit packages” were significant barriers to retaining teachers in rural settings (p. 10). They noted, “Although school leaders, superintendents, in particular must be aware of economic factors when making salary offers or negotiating collective bargaining agreements, they are likely unable to dramatically increase the funding available in rural settings” (p. 10). Similarly, earlier research by Osterholm et al. (2006) corroborates this, noting that “rural schools often have limited ability to compete on initial salary offers or keep pace with salary increases in urban and suburban districts” (as cited in Seelig & McCabe, 2021, p. 2).

These findings highlight a persistent issue spanning decades: salary disparities significantly impact teachers' decisions to remain in their roles, especially as they take on family

responsibilities or face financial obligations such as home, car, or education loans. Beyond salary, teachers' sense of value and their ability to connect with students also influence their desire to stay in rural schools (Fullan, 2007).

Professional Demands

A significant body of research explored why teachers choose to leave, consistently citing factors such as low salaries, lack of access to technology, and inadequate professional development that led to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Engle et al., 2024). Another critical issue is teachers being overwhelmed by the number of courses they teach, or “preps.” For example, Barrow and Burchett (2000) revealed that 49% of rural science teachers in their study had more than four daily preparations. Feeling overworked, underpaid, and underprepared likely contributes to the high attrition rates in rural districts. Barley (2009) further investigated how teacher education programs address the specific needs of rural school districts, finding that out of 120 institutions, only 17 offered a rural program emphasis. Even then, this emphasis was often limited to elective courses that were not mandatory, leaving many future teachers without the foundational knowledge needed to succeed in rural settings (Yoho & Moore, 2023).

Interpersonal connections with students, or the lack thereof, also play a significant role in teachers' decisions to stay or leave rural schools (Cuervo, 2025). When rural districts struggle to fill open positions, they are often forced to hire underqualified teachers who may be unprepared to teach the required courses (Guha & Hyler, 2016). This dual challenge having teachers who are both overworked and underprepared creates a cycle that jeopardizes the success of both teachers and students.

To address these challenges, it is vital for rural schools to gain additional resources to remain competitive with their suburban counterparts. Recognizing the excessive professional

demands placed on teachers is essential. Excessive workloads and stress not only diminish job satisfaction but also contribute to burnout and attrition (Huyghebaert et al., 2018). Rural districts must take steps to lighten these professional burdens and ensure teachers find fulfillment in their roles (Sanchez et al., 2018).

Student Motivation and Performance

Student Motivation

Student motivation is a challenge not only in rural schools but across schools of all backgrounds and locations. However, the gap in student motivation between rural and non-rural schools is significant, particularly when examining dropout rates (Hadre et al., 2009). Teachers in rural schools are tasked with understanding what each student values and what motivates them, a daunting and often stressful responsibility (Beckwith & Hirshfield, 2021). Beyond building connections with students, teachers must also ensure their students meet content standards for mandated tests, which brings on additional stressors (Woodrum, 2004). Rural educators, in particular, face additional obstacles in motivating students to achieve at the levels required by state educational mandates.

In one study, student teachers observed that “the teachers emphasized the need to develop a “life beyond school” perspective within their students, while emphasizing the need to develop academic and dispositional skills given the complex workforce their students would enter” (Vaughn & Saul, 2013). This highlights that student motivation is influenced not only by personal interests but also by the alignment of curriculum with career goals. A curriculum that connects classroom skills to students’ individual interests and future careers could yield better results for both students and teachers (Roberts, 2013).

High-stakes testing also hinders student motivation, as these tests often impose pressures tied to school-wide punishments and diminish intrinsic motivation for both students and staff (Howard et al., 2021). Helping teachers and students understand the long-term value of education is critical for rural schools to achieve positive results and retain strong educators. When students perceive little connection between their education and future career prospects, it becomes difficult for teachers to inspire them. Azano and Stewart (2015) observed that “students who had no plans for postsecondary education lacked motivation during class” (p. 7). This lack of motivation among students who view school as merely a requirement can create a culture of apathy, undermining educational progress. Teachers must work hard to build relationships with these students to foster engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004), but without the right tools, changing students' attitudes can be challenging.

The lack of culturally relevant resources also contributes to student disengagement. Parton and Azano (2022) noted, “We found it difficult to find ourselves reflected in the books we read or taught, in the pedagogies and best practices we learned about, or in the literacy scholarship advanced in journals like this one” (p. 175). The disconnects between mandated curricula and the realities of rural students' lives presents a significant barrier. Teachers need the autonomy to implement alternative teaching methods to engage and motivate their students.

Barley (2009) supported this, finding that

The new instructors are trained to develop curricula that integrate native language and culture, in an attempt to engage students more fully. The hope is to develop role models who will improve students' academic success and motivate them to stay in school. (p. 13).

By empowering teachers to use creative strategies, such as incorporating students' native languages or cultural elements into lessons, schools can foster trust and engagement within the

community. Increased student motivation can also enhance teachers' personal motivation, reducing attrition and promoting long-term success in rural schools.

Student Performance

Student performance, or the progress students make toward achieving educational goals, is one of the most critical metrics studied in school districts (Yang & Li, 2018). Numerous factors influence student performance, including human and structural capital. These encompass access to updated technology and teachers who are equipped to effectively integrate it into their instruction and assessment (Power et al., 2020). In rural districts, however, student performance often lags behind due to persistent challenges such as limited access to basic technology. Resources or even lack of funding for them remain a significant issue for many rural students (Turnage, 2020). The most recent *Why Rural Matters Report* (Showalter et al., 2023) highlights these disparities, noting the ongoing struggle rural schools face in providing equitable access to technological resources necessary for student success when it states

13.4% of rural households lack minimum broadband connection for streaming educational videos or virtual classrooms. In six states, more than one in six rural households lacks at least a basic broadband connection: New Mexico (21.4%), Mississippi (20.6%), Alabama (18.9%), West Virginia (17.5%), Arkansas (17.4%), and Louisiana (17.2%). (p. 5)

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a majority of schools to transition to online learning, but for many rural communities, this was not a viable option due to a lack of internet access and technological resources (Whitacre, 2021). As students across all school districts continue to recover from the educational disruptions caused by the pandemic, those in rural areas without reliable internet access are particularly disadvantaged (Graves et al., 2021). Without the ability to bring their education home in a virtual format, these students were left to rely solely on physical resources, further widening the achievement gap (Hampton et al., 2023). This digital divide

exacerbated pre-existing inequities, leaving many rural students among the most vulnerable in terms of educational progress. In looking at the data in the *Why Rural Matters Report* it shows

As with rural NAEP composite reading scores, on average, the composite scores for fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP reading show very little disparity between rural students and all students in the United States. However, in a few states such as New Mexico, Hawaii, West Virginia, Alabama, and Louisiana, rural students have significantly lower NAEP scores than the average combined scores of rural and non-rural students in the United States. (Showalter et al. 2023, p. 38)

This information highlights various perspectives on the challenges facing rural education. While data shows that a majority of rural students perform on par with their peers in other settings who themselves may still fall below average levels in five states, rural students lag significantly behind the current national averages. As a result, rural districts feel immense pressure to help these students catch up, particularly to meet college admissions standards despite the personal and systemic obstacles they face (Hardré, 2009).

Standardized test results indicate that many rural students are not performing at the levels expected by state and federal education standards. This puts teachers in a difficult position, as they are tasked with improving student outcomes, often with students who may lack intrinsic motivation to perform well. Vaughn et al. (2021) noted, “Moreover, publicized school performance based on how well students perform on mandated high-stakes tests often results in contexts where teachers face pressure to teach to the test. These poor working conditions contribute to costly and detrimental teacher turnover and teacher shortages” (Zeichner, 2018, as cited in Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 2).

This situation suggests a potential correlation between teacher attrition rates and student performance. When students show low motivation to perform on tests, it adds to the stress and dissatisfaction teachers experience, contributing to higher turnover rates. This cycle further compounds the challenges of achieving meaningful improvement in rural education.

The Favorable Aspects of Teaching in a Rural District

Relationships

Relationships are a crucial aspect of why many individuals enter the field of education. In smaller schools and communities, the importance of interpersonal relationships could be even more pronounced (Miller, 1991). Teachers in these close-knit environments often form personal connections with both students and community stakeholders, which can enhance their sense of self-worth and professional fulfillment (Spilt et al., 2011). The ability for teachers to rise above external labels or stereotypes placed on their schools is a key factor in their continued success.

Azano and Stewart (2015) emphasized this point, stating, “We individually noted common themes, such as pre-conceived notions of place, the importance of relationships, and deficit model thinking” (p. 4). Deficit thinking, in this context, refers to the belief that students cannot achieve due to their socioeconomic or environmental circumstances. However, successful rural teachers overcome this mindset by building strong relationships with their communities and students, and this can help them appreciate their rural student’s capabilities further as they know more about their environment (Brenner et al., 2021). These meaningful connections foster a sense of purpose and achievement that motivates teachers to remain in their roles within the community.

Spilt et al. (2011) further highlighted that teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students have a significant impact on job satisfaction. When teachers view these relationships as

mostly positive, this can outweigh the challenging aspects of their jobs, reducing feelings of dissatisfaction and increasing feelings of emotional intelligence (Kasheem et al., 2025).

Identifying trends in the presence and strength of these meaningful connections could provide valuable insights for stakeholders. By fostering strong teacher-student relationships, rural districts may be better equipped to address the attrition rates that often challenge them (Irvin et al., 2020).

Student-Teacher Relationships

The student-teacher relationship is a vital factor in both the success and enjoyment of the educational experience for both groups. Students are the driving force behind teachers' long hours, sponsorship of extracurricular activities, and continuous efforts to refine instructional methods to help them become successful adults (Choudhury & Chechi, 2021). In many rural classrooms, these relationships are particularly strong and tight-knit, which may help explain why rural schools often have higher graduation rates than their non-rural counterparts (NCES, 2023).

Evidence of these close connections can be seen in Vaughn's assertion that "different teachers' visions may focus on different aspects of teaching that they prioritize, such as the ways they engage students in content knowledge or cultivate relationships with students" (Vaughn, 2016, as cited in Vaughn et al., 2021, p. 2). In rural areas, teachers and students find unique ways to support and inspire each other, fostering a sense of mutual investment in learning. However, challenges persist, as Vaughn and Saul (2013) highlight: "For rural educators, with limited numbers of faculty and scarce resources, the challenges to cultivate collaborative relationships is essential to support day-to-day functioning and student success" (p. 6).

Notably, it is not only experienced teachers who recognize the significance of these relationships, pre-service teachers (PSTs) have also acknowledged their impact. Azano and Stewart (2015) found that “all four participants noted that teaching in rural schools allowed them to cultivate close relationships with students” (p. 6). This suggests that rural school districts could strengthen teacher retention by actively showcasing how meaningful student-teacher connections are nurtured in their schools.

When teachers build strong relationships with their students, they gain deeper insight into individual needs and learning styles. Vaughn et al. (2021) emphasizes the importance of this adaptability, stating that “teachers need to be learner-ready, which means they respond to individual students’ needs, differentiate instruction, and provide culturally relevant teaching” (p. 2). If mutual respect and a sense of community are present in the classroom, significant educational progress can be made even when tackling complex topics that may challenge the prevailing political or cultural ideologies in the community.

Parton and Azano (2022) illustrate the importance of taking risks for students, citing an English teacher who “structured her classroom practices to support and celebrate LGBTQ+ rural youth” (p. 173). In communities where certain perspectives may be in the minority, the relationships forged between students and teachers can become nearly unbreakable.

Moreover, student-teacher relationships are not only crucial for teacher satisfaction but also for a child’s overall development. Pianta et al. (2012) suggest that these relationships have a lasting impact on students’ academic and emotional growth. The broader community also plays a role when educators embrace their colleagues and their surroundings, they can experience a profound sense of fulfillment, reinforcing their commitment to remaining in their roles.

Teacher-Community Relationships

In small towns, schools serve as more than just educational institutions; they are an agent that binds the social and economic vitality of the community (Berry & West, 2010). They host sporting events, fundraisers, and cultural celebrations, making them a focal point of local identity and pride. Teachers, administrators, and school staff play a crucial role in fostering meaningful relationships with the broader community, particularly through the public use of school infrastructure (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

To further support the idea that strong relationships between schools and the community are essential, Seelig and McCabe state:

We posit that “community” is embodied by teachers, students, and administrators through their personal values, histories, and beliefs essentially bringing the community within the school walls and infusing all that occurs with a sense of community. Simultaneously, the school itself is situated geographically and historically within a particular rural community, which is reflected within the political, economic, and cultural relationships with community members, business owners’, and local politicians (Seeling & McCabe, 2021, p. 13).

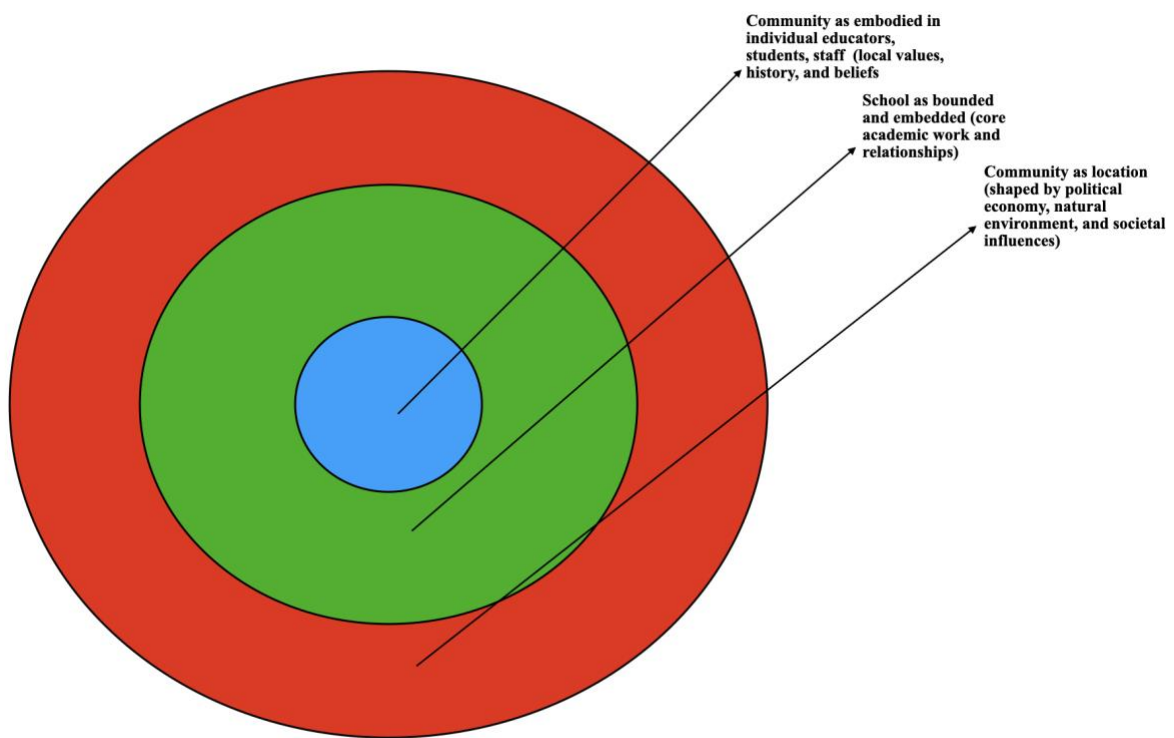
Living within the community allows teachers to experience a deeper and more genuine level of support through the positive aspects of communal relationships. In rural areas, the local business owner's child might sit across from a politician’s, creating a shared sense of responsibility for education. Barley (2009) highlights this dynamic, stating, “While there are many positive aspects of rural teaching such as small class sizes and a closer relationship with parents” (p. 10).

The interconnected nature of rural life fosters informal, yet meaningful interactions between teachers and parents that can have positive impacts on student success (Lin et al., 2014). Running into a parent at the grocery store or a local restaurant often leads to more relaxed and genuine conversations compared to the structured setting of parent-teacher conferences. For

many educators, this sense of connectedness is a key benefit of teaching in a rural community. Azano and Stewart (2015) found that “in addition to classroom relationships, participants also noted community connectedness as an important and beneficial aspect of teaching in a rural community. Not only did the participants describe rural communities as close or tight knit, but they also said this understanding allowed them to use the community features in their instruction” (p. 6).

For teachers who value a strong sense of community and familial support, working in a rural school can be an ideal and fulfilling choice.

Figure 2.1 *Colocated Model of Rural School and Community*



Note. This model reflects the complex relationship and blurred boundaries between rural school and community.

Note. Adapted from Seeling & McCabe, 2021

As illustrated in the model of rural school and community (Figure 2.1), community relationships are fundamental to the core of both the school and the broader rural area. Strong relationships within small towns can contribute to overall improvement for all members of the community. Seeling and McCabe (2021) emphasize this point, stating, “The close relationships teachers often had with students, as well as connections with the community and consistent communication with other school staff, also supported their instructional practices (p. 12).”

Teachers who understand their home community and have personal connections to them have a significant advantage in their instructional approach (Barley & Beesley, 2007). For example, a social studies teacher might invite the local mayor or a city council member to engage with students in a Q&A session, a bank owner could discuss FDIC regulations in a business class, or a local farmer might explain the chemical composition of fertilizers and soil in a science class. Burton et al. (2013) further supports this notion, highlighting that one subject in their study felt empowered and committed to their teaching position due to their strong connection with the community.

Community support can serve as a powerful retention tool for rural teachers. However, another critical factor influencing teacher retention is administrative support.

Teacher-Administrator Relationships

Having a supportive administrator is a crucial factor in teacher retention, often influencing educators to remain in their roles longer than they initially intended. Tran and Dou (2019) found that several rural teachers in their study identified positive administrative support as a key factor in their decision to stay in their respective positions. Effective administrators recognize both the challenges and strengths of their schools, fostering an environment where teachers feel empowered and valued (DuFour et al., 1990).

Seeling and McCabe (2021) emphasize this point, stating, “While teachers exerted the most control over their work environment within their individual classrooms, respectful and trusting relationships with administrators allowed for teachers’ sense of autonomy to be a positive workplace attribute instead of surfacing as professional isolation (p. 12).” This highlights a critical balance in leadership ensuring that teachers feel trusted and independent while avoiding the perception of being left unsupported. Administrators who rarely visit classrooms or are generally unreachable may be seen as disengaged (Price, 2015), while those who visit too frequently may be perceived as mistrusting or micromanaging (Limon, & Dilekçi, 2021).

Frahm and Cianca (2021) further illustrate the importance of intentional relationship-building in rural schools: “The results of the study also included the finding that rural schools have to try considerably harder and in more active ways to build authentic relationships because of the isolation that new teachers often experience” (p. 6). Creativity in leadership can foster a strong sense of community, but it must be genuine. Administrators should actively engage with their staff, understanding their needs and challenges to create a supportive school culture (Kutsyuruba, 2020).

Moreover, administrators do not have to build teacher morale alone. Frahm and Cianca (2021) note that “participants also suggested that administrators could help prevent troubling levels of isolation for novice educators by helping them build positive peer relationships” (p. 7). Teachers need trusted colleagues within their schools’ peers they can confide in and collaborate with which fosters a sense of belonging and support. Seeling and McCabe (2021) echo this sentiment: “In each district, teachers discussed the importance of supportive relationships with their colleagues and administrators as influencing their retention decisions” (p. 8).

In rural schools, meaningful relationships are a foundational element of teacher satisfaction. Preston and Barnes (2017) emphasize that “studies highlight that a successful rural leader promotes a professional school culture where teachers feel empowered to try new ideas (p. 11).” Establishing and maintaining authentic relationships within rural schools can positively impact teacher retention rates (White, 2023), as compared to districts where relationships are not as actively cultivated. Furthermore, Preston and Barnes (2017) highlight the importance of accessibility, noting that rural school principals are often available when their teachers need them, which contributes to a culture of trust and support.

The need for strong administrative support extends beyond teachers. Administrators themselves require encouragement and guidance from their superintendents, as this fosters a culture of trust and collaboration within the district (Forner et al., 2012). Given the importance of relationships at every level of a school system, future research should explore whether intentionally cultivating these relationships can serve as a long-term strategy for improving teacher satisfaction and retention in rural districts.

Theoretical Framework

Four Capital Theory

Mason and Matas (2015) present a modern perspective on how various forms of capital influence teacher attrition. Their research highlights the significance of capital in retaining educators and identifies four key areas essential for teacher retention: human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital. Additionally, Mason and Matas identified thirteen themes that contribute to teacher attrition or retention (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Themes and Descriptions

Themes and Descriptions
Human Capital
Professional skills and knowledge
Presence, quality, and nature of preservice education
Opportunities for and relevance of continuing professional development
Social Capital
Quality of relationships with members of school community
Presence and quality of leadership
School culture
Presence, quality and nature of informal and formal support
Value of teachers and teaching
Structural Capital
Nature and complexity of role
Employment conditions, structures and pathways
Departmental policies
School resources and facilities
Positive Psychological Capital
Personality and psychological factors

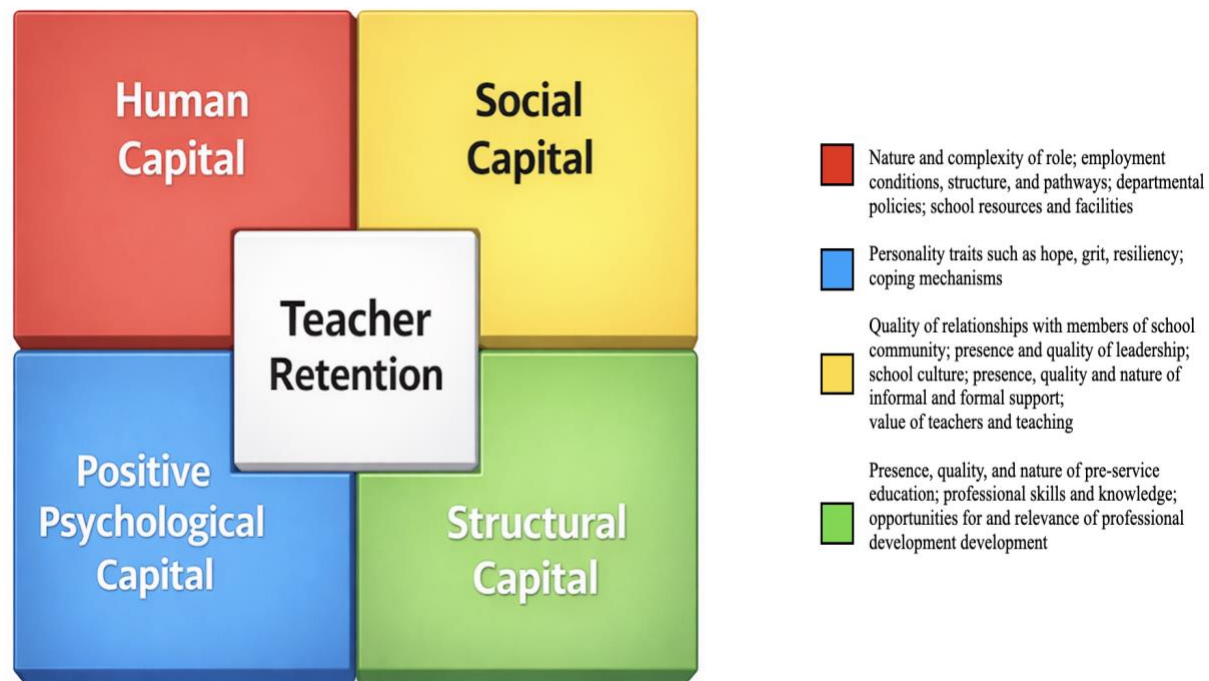
The identification of various themes by Mason and Matas, along with the four capital components that impact attrition, aligns with the themes were examined in this study. This framework is particularly relevant as it is applied similarly to the work of Vaidya and Hanna (2023), who stated, “The four capital framework encompasses various factors that impact a teacher’s work and personal life, both within and outside the school. These factors play a crucial

role in their decisions to stay or leave” (p. 21). It is essential to analyze data from both in-school and out-of-school perspectives, as both influence teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession. As shown in Figure 2.2, each of the themes identified by Mason and Matas corresponds to one of the four capital areas within this framework.

This qualitative study explores the factors that influence rural teachers to remain in the profession. Using Four Capital Theory as a framework, the study examined how human capital, social capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital contributed to teachers' career decisions. Mason and Matas (2015) identified these four capital categories as key factors in understanding teachers' decision-making processes regarding job retention.

Figure 2.2 illustrates how each of the four capitals may impact teacher retention. Questionnaires and interviews were systematically coded, and themes were identified to uncover trends related to these capital categories. Through this approach, the study aimed to reveal patterns and insights into the role of these capitals in retaining rural educators.

Figure 2.2 *Four Capital Theory*



Note. Adapted from Vaidya and Hanna, 2023

The four types of capital discussed above provide potential explanations for why a teacher may choose to remain in or leave the profession. In rural school districts, educators often face challenges related to each of these capitals for various reasons, thus potentially impacting their desire to remain in their current school (Vaidya & Hanna, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial for school districts to foster these areas of capital to support teacher retention effectively.

Human capital refers to the skills and knowledge teachers bring to their roles. Educators equipped with the necessary expertise are seen as productive assets rather than costly liabilities (Hendricks, 2002). Social capital influences a teacher's sense of belonging and importance within the school community. Teachers with strong social capital are more confident in investing in their work and are less likely to engage in negative behaviors (Pretty & Ward, 2001). Structural capital in education ensures that teachers have access to the physical resources, tools, and organizational frameworks necessary to perform their jobs effectively. It encompasses the

knowledge embedded in a school's processes and policies (Hejazi et al., 2016). Lastly, positive psychological capital focuses on fostering personality traits that contribute to a teacher's success. When positive psychological capital is effectively nurtured, it can, as Toor and Ofori (2010) note, "effectively channel and grow employees' talents, strengths, and potentials" (p. 342).

If all four capitals are actively supported in rural school districts, research suggests that attrition rates could decrease significantly.

Human Capital

As Goldin (2024) simply stated, "It encompasses the notion that there are investments in people (e.g., education, training, health) and that these investments increase an individual's productivity (p. 1)." Human capital refers to the resources and training that help individuals improve in their current roles when they are "invested in." The view of human capital as valuable and beneficial has grown significantly. Over the past century, the percentage of adults with some secondary education has increased from 13% to 51% by 2010 (Deming, 2022). This shift reflects the growing global recognition of human capital as a necessity.

Investing in highly qualified teachers is not only crucial for the educators themselves but also for their students. Research indicates that the qualifications of teachers can serve as an indicator of the quality of education students will receive (Abraham & Mallatt, 2022). However, training alone is not sufficient. It is essential that teachers' knowledge and soft-skill competence be addressed to improve overall employee performance (Mislia et al., 2021).

Human capital extends beyond traditional education or training to include the ability to develop cognitive-based skills, such as caring (England & Folbre, 2023). In teaching, human capital is incredibly important; therefore, it is essential that rural districts invest in their teachers and provide them with opportunities for growth and development (Bollman, 1999).

Social Capital

Social capital, as illustrated in Figure 2.2, encompasses culture, relationships, and elements revolving around personal connections in the workplace. The formation of solid relationships is crucial to the school community. In Robison et al. (2002) they define social capital as "Social capital is a person's or group's sympathy toward another person or group that may produce a potential benefit, advantage, and preferential treatment to that other person or group of persons beyond that which might be expected in a selfish exchange relationship (p. 15)." Daily TPF states that social capital benefits both employees and employers, as those who relate to their work tend to be more engaged, which positively impacts student retention (2007).

Interest in social capital has grown significantly over the past decade. Bhandari and Yasunobu (2009) note that social capital has become a focal point in research, reflecting its increasing importance in various fields. As this understanding deepens, the need for organizations, including schools, to foster social capital also grows (Comer, 2015). This trend is evident in the workforce as businesses recognize the need to dive deeper into understanding their employees' needs. Bhandari and Yasunobu (2009) further emphasize that social capital is a complex, multidimensional concept, with various dimensions, types, levels, and determinants that differ across disciplines.

In the context of education, social capital plays a critical role in employee retention. Simply put, "The more relationships a person has, the more social capital one possesses" (Vaidya & Hanna, 2023, p. 26). Social capital does not only extend to the workplace but also encompasses the community. Building strong social capital within the community can significantly contribute to the retention of educators, fostering a sense of belonging and support beyond the confines of the school.

At the level of the local community, social capital depends much more on the day-to-day interactions between neighbors than on distal social policies. In contrast, the level of social capital at the state or country level is more likely to reflect the influence of culture, social and economic policies and other macro-social forces (Lochner et al., 1999, p. 269).

When employees feel welcomed in the community where their organization operates, they can develop positive social capital. Stolle (2003) supports this idea, stating, “In building social capital theory, we also have to look outside organizations and social interactions per se for mechanisms that produce, foster, and/or disturb developments of generalized trust and norms of reciprocity” (p. 35). This suggests that social capital extends beyond the workplace and is influenced by broader community interactions. While social capital is essential for fostering authentic relationships and a strong connection to an organization’s culture, another critical factor is ensuring employees have the necessary tools and resources to perform their jobs effectively. This is known as structural capital.

Structural Capital

Structural capital plays a crucial role in employee retention, particularly in ensuring that workers have the tools and feel adequately supported in their roles (Ekmekci et al., 2025). Structural capital serves as the foundation for human capital, encompassing organizational processes, procedures, technologies, information sources, and intellectual property rights (Malhotra, 2003). Employers must ensure that their employees feel both competent and well-equipped to perform their jobs. This includes providing not only physical tools but also ongoing educational opportunities that allow employees to adapt to industry trends and help improve student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Gogan et al. (2015) highlight that increasing competition among educational institutions regarding social capital could have long-term implications for various stakeholders. Similarly, Aramburu and Sáenz (2011) emphasize that "structural capital explains to a great extent the

effectiveness of the new idea generation process" (p. 319). When employees do not feel effective or competent in their roles, they may begin seeking employment elsewhere, as they may perceive a lack of support, resources, or opportunities for growth.

In rural school districts, structural capital is particularly important for teacher retention. If teachers do not feel adequately prepared due to a lack of resources or support, attrition may become a significant issue, as noted by Mason and Matas (2015). Providing teachers with access to essential resources both physical materials and professional development opportunities is critical to fostering their confidence and overall performance (Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013).

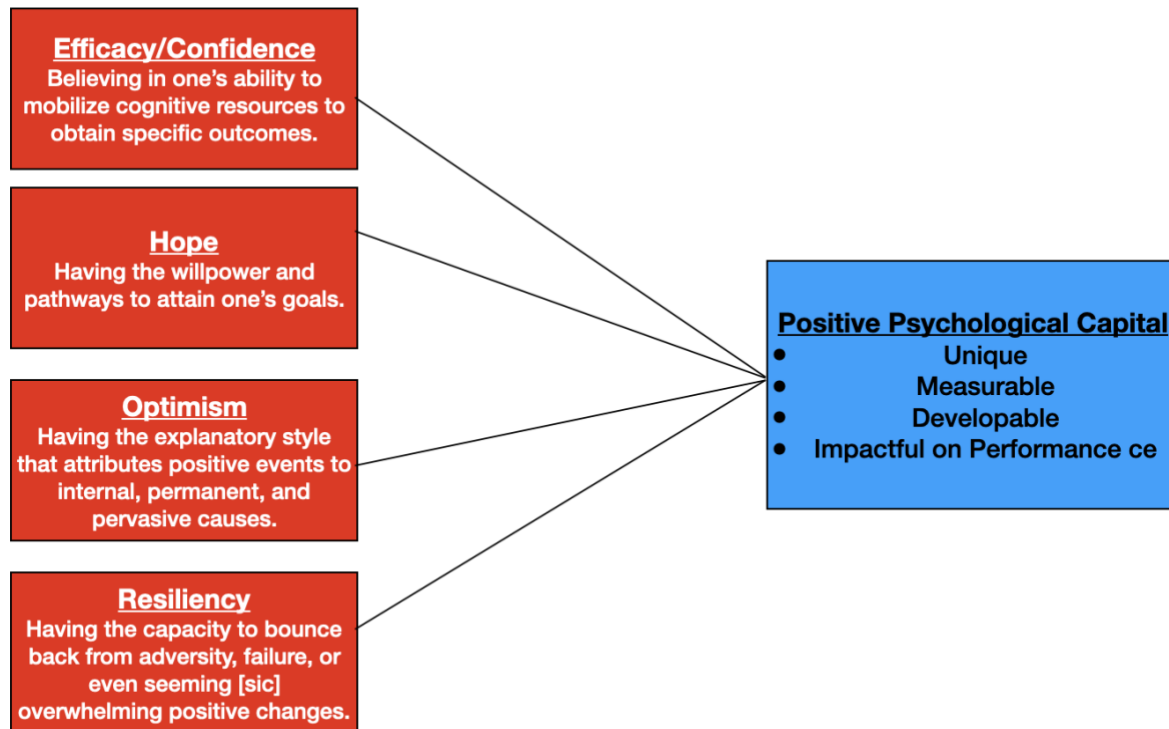
However, not all school districts can offer the same level of professional development and resources. The disparity between disadvantaged and affluent districts has been well documented. Foster (2011) pointed out that when No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted, it was estimated that meeting its requirements would necessitate a 20-35% increase in the national K-12 education budget. Many rural districts were unable to make such an investment, leading to financial strain and, in some cases, school closures (Tieken & Auldridge-Reveles, 2019). While districts may not always be able to provide all the resources teachers need, they can still foster an essential component of structural capital supporting teachers' confidence in their abilities through the development of positive psychological capital.

Positive Psychological Capital

The final component of Four Capital Theory is positive psychological capital, which stems from the broader field of positive psychology, originally developed by Martin Seligman (Sweetman et al., 2011). Positive psychological capital encompasses key psychological resources that contribute to an individual's success and well-being in the workplace. As illustrated in

Figure 2.3, achieving positive psychological capital requires four essential elements: efficacy (confidence), hope, optimism, and resiliency.

Figure 2.3 *Dimensions of Positive Psychological Capital*



Note. Adapted from Luthans & Youssef, 2004

The aforementioned elements are crucial in fostering a supportive work environment. Luthans and Youssef-Morgan (2017) emphasize this point, stating, “what is considered positive in one culture may not necessarily be considered positive in another culture” (p. 26). Understanding employees' needs and actively seeking their input can provide valuable insights into areas requiring improvement.

Beyond social capital, both structural and human capital necessitate investment. Page and Donohue (2004) highlight this, noting that “positive psychological resources require investment and development to realize their full potential” (p. 3). When employees feel valued and supported, they are significantly more likely to remain in their roles (Goswami & Jha, 2012).

Summary

This chapter explored the various factors influencing teachers' decisions to remain in or leave the profession, particularly in rural school districts. To reduce attrition, these districts must actively address the challenges identified while fostering the elements that promote teacher retention. The discussion of human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital highlights how these forms of capital impact not only education but also other career fields. Further research will continue to identify and expand upon additional trends that contribute to teacher retention in rural school settings

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

Good teachers are knowledgeable, experienced, and able to plan long-term educational goals (Beishuizen et al., 2001). Teachers with high expectations significantly increase the likelihood of student success (Stronge et al., 2011), which makes it crucial for schools to retain these individuals. The purpose of the study was to answer the essential question: *What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings?* Providing rural school districts with concrete strategies to reduce teacher attrition and improve retention could be vital to their success otherwise, they may be forced to rely on uncertified teachers (Mollenkopf, 2009). With teacher attrition remaining a major concern, and some causes still unclear, it is essential for rural districts to take proactive steps to retain their educators (Harris et al., 2009). As research suggests, the higher the quality of a teacher, the greater the positive impact on student performance (Petek & Pope, 2023). To explore retention in rural schools, this study will address the following sub-research questions:

SQ1: What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural high school teachers' continued commitment to their schools and communities?

SQ2: How do rural school districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?

SQ3: How does four-capital theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) help explain how rural teachers sustain commitment and professional fulfillment over time?

Research Design and Approach

To support investigating the research questions guiding this study, the study employed qualitative methods utilizing semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire that gathered data from teachers in rural schools. Implementing these methods to discover the areas of capital that teachers found valuable aided in the holistic approach this study employed. Publishing this research will, it is hoped, will lead to greater awareness of what can be done to help rural school districts retain their staff. The design of the research was essential to gathering the necessary components to support rural school districts in maintaining their workforce.

A qualitative research design was chosen to study why rural teachers remain in the profession because qualitative research provides the ability to share individuals' perspectives. Bogdan and Biklen (1997) support this claim, stating, "Qualitative research is descriptive. The data collected take the form of words or pictures rather than numbers" (p. 5). Within qualitative research, it is important to understand the viewpoints of each individual to grasp the rationale behind their choices. Qualitative research allows themes within a community or setting to emerge naturally (Hancock et al., 2001). It is hoped that these connections will resonate not only with the researcher but also with the community engaging with the data. This concept is supported by Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019), who state, "The complexity and aesthetic aspects of the theme can motivate readers to reflect on data and relate the findings to their own personal perspectives" (p.7).

Alignment of Research Questions, Data Sources, Analysis

Table 3.1 displays the research questions that were answered, along with the methods for gathering and analyzing the data. The use of thematic analysis and grounded theory enabled the perspectives of rural teachers to be effectively shared. Thematic analysis was employed to

analyze qualitative data by identifying repeated patterns, which lead to coding and theme identification (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Grounded theory, practiced in an inductive manner, allowed the researcher to build theory from the data that was gathered (Turner & Astin, 2021). By applying both thematic analysis and grounded theory in this study, credible examples were able to emerge to explain why teachers choose to remain in their positions.

Table 3.1. *Summary of Data Sources and Analysis*

Sub Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
SQ1: What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural high school teachers' continued commitment to their schools and communities?	Semi-Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis
SQ2: How do rural school districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?	Semi Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis
SQ3: How does four-capital theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) help explain how rural teachers sustain commitment and professional fulfillment over time?	Questionnaire and Semi-Structured Interviews	Thematic Analysis

Comparable Studies

This study was inspired by others that have been conducted in a similar fashion over educational topics that are closely related. Regarding teacher retention, this study aligns with findings by Seelig and McCabe (2021), who identified that greater authenticity from administrators, economic support from policymakers, and collaboration fostering school culture are crucial for rural educators. Another related study by Malloy and Allen (2007) revealed that teachers feeling heard and not "overly extended" positively impacts retention.

Questionnaire questions for this research were adapted from Casely-Hayford et al. (2022) and Moser and McKim (2020), as their work provides valuable insights relevant to rural teacher retention. Semi-structured interviews, inspired by Grillo and Kier (2021), allowed teachers to share how they handle both challenges and successes in their roles. Interview questions were also

drawn from Richter et al. (2022) and Zhang and Zeller (2016), offering foundational starting points for discussions on retention-related topics.

The theoretical framework for this study is Four Capital Theory, introduced by Mason and Matas (2015). While this framework is relatively new, its relevance remains evident. Mason and Matas' work was also preferred by Carr (2023) in "Administrative Perspectives on Teacher Recruitment and Retention During a Pandemic." Additionally, Vaidya and Hanna (2023) highlight how this framework can address teacher attrition and retention effectively.

Study Context and Participants

The research was conducted in rural secondary schools with teachers who had been at their school for at least three years. With the study focusing on what do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings, it was vital that the study location be a rural school district where the teachers work. According to Diliberti et al. (2021) the Midwest attrition rate was 12% in 2020. According to Schaeffer (2022) in 2020 77% of teachers were female and 23% were men. Also 80% of teachers were Caucasian (white non-Hispanic), 9% were Hispanic, 6% were Black, 2% were Asian or multiracial. Teachers were contacted via email with a voluntary questionnaire. Responses were reviewed, and teachers who qualified were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview via Zoom.

Participants

The recruitment process for participants in the study was approved by Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. To recruit participants who fit the study's criteria, several essential parameters were applied. To determine if a school district was rural, the USDA's definition of rural classification was used: a town with fewer than 5,000 total residents (USDA, 2024). Teachers had to have been in their roles for at least three years in

their rural district. The study included only middle school or high school teachers. In total 10 teachers were chosen from the screening questionnaire and were interviewed. To protect participant anonymity, all teachers have been assigned pseudonyms.

To gather the most relevant data, a purposeful sampling method was employed. Suri (2011) highlights that purposeful sampling is valuable because it relies on informants who can provide information that is particularly rich for specific cases. Purposeful sampling is a valuable technique in qualitative research, enabling the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the efficient use of limited resources (Patton, 2014). In rural districts, where resources and candidate pools are often limited, this methodology is particularly critical.

An additional advantage of purposeful sampling is its focus on selecting individuals or groups knowledgeable about a specific phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano, 2011). For this study, it was essential to recruit individuals who can provide meaningful insights into the factors being researched. This method facilitates the drawing of conclusions that address the study's objectives.

The significance of retaining teachers in high-demand areas is underscored by Ingersoll and Tran (2023), who note that “high-poverty rural public schools have unusually high rates of turnover; almost 28% of their teachers depart annually.” (p. 416) This turnover is particularly prevalent among pre-retirement teachers leaving due to dissatisfaction or a desire for better opportunities. Table 3.2 illustrates the findings of Ingersoll and Tran as it pertains to teacher migration and attrition based on school poverty level. By addressing these issues, this research aims to contribute to reducing teacher turnover in rural districts by offering suggestions that rural teachers give during their questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Table 3.2. *Percent Teacher Migration and Attrition by School Locale and School Poverty Level*
(Recreated from Ingersoll and Tran, 2023)

Attribute	Migration	Attrition	Total Turnover
School Location	8.1 (.4)	7.7 (.4)	15.8 (.6)
<i>All</i>	8.1 (.4)	7.7 (.4)	15.8 (.6)
<i>Urban</i>	7.9 (.9)	9.8 (.8)	17.7 (1.0)
<i>Suburban</i>	7.8 (.8)	7.3 (.8)	15.1 (1.0)
<i>Rural</i>	7.0 (.7)	8.4 (.7)	15.4 (.9)
Poverty Level			
<i>Low-poverty</i>	6.2 (1.0)	5.4 (.9)	11.6 (1.3)
<i>High-poverty</i>	12.4 (1.3)	9.6 (1.1)	22.1 (1.6)
<i>Low-poverty suburban</i>	6.5 (1.7)	5.3 (1.3)	11.8 (1.9)
<i>High-poverty urban</i>	12.1 (1.8)	7.0 (1.4)	19.1 (2.2)
<i>Low-poverty rural</i>	5.1 (1.6)	6.2 (1.8)	11.3 (2.4)
<i>High-poverty rural</i>	10.7 (2.4)	17.2 (2.9)	27.9 (3.4)

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses. High-poverty schools are those in which 80% or more of students qualify for the National School Lunch Program. Low-poverty schools are those in which fewer than 15% of students qualify for the National School Lunch Program.

Data Sources and Collection

This study utilized a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews as the primary data gathering instruments. The questionnaire acted as a recruitment tool and data source and was collected at the beginning of the study. Participants who agreed to participate in follow-up interviews were asked to complete two semi-structured interviews. Each data source is described below.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires were the first method used to screen potential candidates and collect data. The quantitative questionnaire was used as a means to gain the initial understandings of the participants thoughts about the four capitals prior to engaging in their interview(s). Structured questionnaires can trace their usage all the way back to Sir Francis Bacon in the 1620's (Fox,

2010). Their use in data gathering is prevalent throughout history, For the sake of this study a more modern approach was taken as questionnaires were distributed in a Google Form format to collect data, while semi-structured interviews captured in-depth qualitative insights. Modern online questionnaires offer flexibility, and using Likert-style scales can be calculated quickly and accurately (Treiblmaier & Filzmoser, 2011). Self-administered questionnaires offer advantages as a data gathering tool, as it is a self-paced and simplified approach for the respondent to share their answers (Dalati & Marx Gómez, 2018).

In this research, questionnaires were used in alignment with Sofaer's (1999) approach, where a small number of one-on-one interviews are conducted with individuals who meet the criteria for completing a particular questionnaire. The questionnaire served as a screening tool, allowing the researcher to identify potential interview candidates and gather data on rural school retention and teachers' experiences. The questionnaire was used to gather teachers' initial perceptions and experiences related to the four capitals outlined in the Four Capital Theory. In total, 25 questionnaires were received. After review, candidates who did not meet the study criteria were removed from consideration, including individuals with fewer than three years of teaching experience in their current school and non-teaching staff members, such as counselors and a superintendent who responded to the questionnaire. In total 14 teachers were asked to participate in the interviews, of those 14 only 10 responded to requests to schedule a time to conduct their interview(s).

Participants completed a questionnaire (Appendix A) at the beginning of the study, serving as both a recruitment and data collection tool. The questionnaire was appropriate for screening potential participants and included general statements about their educational background, tenure at their current school, and feelings about their jobs.

The questionnaire, designed as a Google Form, was distributed via email to rural school districts across the Midwest. Participants ranked their responses on a 1–5 Likert scale, as explained by Nemeto and Beglar (2014), to indicate their level of agreement with various statements. Each statement corresponded to one of the four capital categories in Mason and Matas's theory. Examples of questionnaire statements include:

- **Human capital:** "My workplace values my development as a professional."
- **Social capital:** "My values are similar to my school's values."
- **Structural capital:** "I feel like I have the tools to be successful at my job."
- **Positive psychological capital:** "I plan to remain teaching until I retire."

These questionnaire statements facilitated an analysis of how each capital influences teachers' decisions to stay in their rural high school positions. After distributing the questionnaire in Spring 2025, the responses were reviewed within one week. Subsequently, potential participants received invitations to participate in interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

As a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather data. Austin and Sutton (2014) noted that qualitative research seeks to explain human behavior and the choices individuals make. To achieve meaningful insights, semi-structured interviews were the most suitable choice for this research.

All tools used in the data collection and analysis process contributed to answering the overarching question of why rural teachers choose to stay in the profession. To ensure the validity of findings, data collection and analysis was continued until saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Additionally, participants were provided informed consent (Appendix B) before completing the questionnaire or participating in interviews.

A semi-structured interview involves the researcher focusing on a specific topic, preparing a limited number of questions in advance, and planning to ask follow-up questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, making it ideal for understanding the factors influencing rural teacher retention.

Semi-structured interviews followed the initial screening questionnaire and involved the selected participants. This format was ideal as it allowed candidates to provide open-ended responses and offered flexibility for the interviewer to adapt questions based on their answers. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, with screen recording enabled for accuracy. The interviews took place in either one or two rounds, per participant choice. The structure of the interviews was as follows:

Semi structured interview #1 focused on understanding the participant on a personal level and exploring initial insights into human capital. Example questions include "how did you become a teacher" and "according to your understanding, what factors force teachers to leave their job" helped gather the teachers background and thoughts regarding teacher attrition. The next set of questions focused on human capital, asked items such as "how has your experience in your school made you a better teacher" and "what do you think has kept teachers like yourself wanting to remain working here?" The interview transcript for semi structured interview #1 is located in the appendices and is labeled "Appendix C."

Semi structured interview #2 delved into the remaining three capitals: social, structural, and positive-psychological. Questions regarding social capital for each area included "how do relationships play a role in your desire to remain a teacher" and "do you think you are trusted as

a teacher by your administration and school district officials?" Questions that addressed structural capital asked "do you have the ability to be successful in your role here" and "are professional growth opportunities available here for those who want them?" Lastly, positive psychological capital was addressed by asking questions like "do you think your school values your overall well-being" and "do you feel safe and welcome at your school?" The interview transcript for semi structured interview #2 is located in the appendices and is labeled "Appendix D." Both semi-structured interviews used a scripted interview protocol script before the interview and at the conclusion, this can be found in "Appendix E."

After analysis it was determined that 7/10 teachers preferred to have one large interview. The interviews were performed back-to-back and all scripts were followed just as they were with the three participants that chose two separate interviews.

Following the conclusion of the semi-structured interviews, the coding phase of the research began. The collected data were analyzed to identify themes and trends related to the four capital categories and their impact on teacher retention.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were analyzed and triangulated to address each research question. This triangulated approach enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings by cross-referencing data from multiple sources (Patton, 1999). The following sections outline the data analysis methods that were employed.

Coding in Qualitative Research

Across the analysis of data for each research question, a similar approach to qualitative coding techniques was employed. Coding was a critical process in qualitative research, allowing researchers to organize, categorize, and interpret data to uncover meaning (Williams & Moser,

2019). Effective coding facilitated the identification of themes, enabling researchers to present findings in a coherent and persuasive manner (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Additionally, coding helps minimize researcher bias and enhances the validity of the study (Blair, 2015).

In this study, four coding techniques will were employed:

- **Open Coding:** This initial phase involved breaking the data into discrete parts and assigning labels to identify potential themes and patterns. The identification of structural tensions and sustaining forces began in this phase.
- **In Vivo Coding:** This technique used participants' exact words as codes, ensuring that their voices and perspectives were authentically represented. The direct quotes of each participant were captured during this phase.
- **Axial Coding:** This phase involved organizing the data into categories and subcategories to identify themes.
- **Focused Coding:** This advanced phase involved refining and integrating codes to develop core themes aligned with the study's research questions, (SQ1, SQ2, SQ3).

The use of these coding techniques did allow for a thorough and accurate interpretation of the data collected through the chosen methodologies (Saldaña, 2021). Within these different coding methods, they were compared, using constant comparative analysis. Constant comparative analysis developed by Glaser is the process of comparing new data with the previously collected data, this helped categorize the information and identify different themes (1965). By leveraging these methods, the study produced findings that were considered both credible and meaningful. With the constant comparative method and analytic memoing it allowed for greater

accountability with the step-by-step approach and accounting from my experiences as both a teacher and researcher (Boeije, 2002).

Analysis of Sub Research Question 1

Data for SQ1 was analyzed based on responses from the semi structured interviews. This interview focused on questions directly addressing why teachers choose to stay in their roles, with a specific emphasis on the capital theory framework by Mason and Matas.

To analyze SQ1, data was gathered from the interviews. These methods provided insights into why teachers choose to stay in their roles, specifically through the lens of their personal history and their interpretation of human capital.

The data analysis began with in vivo coding, a qualitative coding method where codes are derived directly from participants' statements (Saldaña, 2021). This approach ensured that participants' voices were accurately represented and minimized researcher bias. As Saldaña notes, in vivo coding involves identifying and coding the most essential parts of the data, with repeated use of the same codes helping to establish consistency and reliability.

In vivo coding served as the initial step in the coding cycle, which is typically the first stage of qualitative data analysis (Khandkar, 2009). This process enabled the researcher to extract key phrases and statements from participants, which were used to build categories. These categories served as the foundation for identifying themes across the data collected from questionnaires and interviews.

For SQ1 the semi structured interviews provided a deeper understanding of why teachers remain in their profession, particularly in relation to their personal experiences and the human capital factors that influence their decision-making.

Analysis of Sub Research Question 2

Data for SQ2 was derived from the semi structured interviews. This introductory interview explored teachers' overall history in rural education, allowing participants to share insights about their experiences and provide suggestions for improvements. The culminating component of this protocol involved participants sharing what they believed would encourage greater retention in their schools.

To analyze SQ2, data was gathered from the first round of interviews and the second round of interviews. These methods provided a comprehensive approach to understanding how rural schools can improve teacher retention. Since this research focuses on identifying impactful strategies for retention, analyzing all three data collection methods was essential.

Open coding, sometimes referred to as "initial coding" (Saldaña, 2021) was the chosen method for this phase of the analysis. Open coding involves breaking the data into distinct parts, coding and categorizing those parts, and identifying emerging themes across the data. This process enables researchers to develop meaningful interpretations and uncover patterns that apply to the collected information. While open coding can be a meticulous and time-intensive process, it is a crucial tool in qualitative data analysis (Khandkar, 2009).

The use of open coding allowed for the development of appropriate categories, organizing the data in a way that facilitates comparisons of participants' perspectives. By grouping and analyzing the opinions of participants, the research highlighted key strategies that rural schools can implement to enhance teacher retention. These insights provided actionable recommendations for school districts aiming to address this critical issue.

Analysis of Sub Research Question 3

Capital theory was employed as a framework to categorize and interpret responses from the questionnaire and the semi structured interviews. After the data were gathered, coded, and organized by themes, it was analyzed to assess how social capital, human capital, structural capital, and positive psychological capital contribute to teachers' decisions to stay or leave rural school districts.

To analyze SQ3, data was gathered from questionnaires, the first round of interviews, and the second round of interviews. Since capital theory was integral to all three research questions, this analysis drew connections across multiple data sources.

The analysis began with axial coding, which examines relationships between the concepts and categories developed during open and in vivo coding (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Axial coding focuses on linking categories and subcategories to explore the relationships within the data (Saldaña, 2021). One of the primary goals of axial coding is to achieve saturation, where no new categories or relationships emerge. As Scott and Medaugh (2017) explain, "The purpose of this analytic phase is to consider and develop relationships between working categories and subcategories, in order to capture both general properties of a phenomenon and dimensional variation." (p. 1)

Axial coding was critical in this research, as it allowed for organizing participants' responses into relevant categories which aligned with the four dimensions of capital theory: human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital. This process ensured a clear understanding of how these factors contributed to teachers' decisions to stay in their profession.

Focused Coding

The final stage of coding for each RQ was focused coding (also referred to as theoretical coding). Focused coding integrates the categories developed during axial coding into a single core theme or theory (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019). Saldaña (2021) describes focused coding as an “umbrella” that unites all codes and categories into a concise representation of the study’s central findings. A core theme served as the focus of the analysis, with all data interpreted in relation to this central idea.

Focused coding also confirmed whether saturation was achieved during axial coding. As Holton (2007) notes, the identification of a core variable is essential for the focused coding process. If the core variable cannot be identified, the data lacks the cohesion necessary to proceed with this stage. By completing focused coding as the final round of coding, this research culminated in a clear and coherent narrative, demonstrating how capital theory explains rural teacher retention and provides actionable insights for reducing attrition.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure rigor and credibility, this study incorporated multiple strategies aligned with the Four Capital Theory presented by Mason and Matas (2015). In order to ensure rigor was achieved data systems were in place in the form of triangulation of data, analytic memoing, and external validity measures. Triangulation was employed, with data collected from various sources, including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documents. These materials aimed to validate the intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing why teachers remain in their roles as rural educators (Chiong et al., 2017).

Questionnaire statements were categorized according to the four capital sections identified by Mason and Matas, enabling direct comparison between questionnaire results and

findings from semi-structured interviews.. By utilizing triangulation methods to cross-check data, this study seeks to accurately portray the motivations behind teachers' decisions to remain in their current roles.

Triangulation

Triangulation involves combining data from multiple sources, such as questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings (Patton, 1999). The implementation of triangulation techniques enhanced the trustworthiness of this research by providing a comprehensive understanding of rural teachers' perspectives (Stahl & King, 2020). Using data source triangulation, it gave the researcher the ability to compare multiple perspectives regarding the topic of teacher retention in rural districts, this aided in validating the results (Carter, 2014). Lastly, theoretical triangulation was used as a means to compare multiple theories while using the same data (Thurmond, 2001).

Questionnaires were distributed in a Google Form format to collect quantitative data, while semi-structured interviews captured in-depth qualitative insights. With the interviews being recorded over "Zoom" this allowed the researcher the ability to rewatch the recordings as many times as needed. Additionally, the audio recordings were transcribed using the software provided by Zoom Workplace Pro.

By cross-referencing findings from questionnaires and interviews, triangulation ensured a more holistic representation of the data and reduced the risk of researcher bias. This method strengthened the overall credibility and reliability of the study, enabling the researcher to provide a nuanced explanation of rural teacher retention.

Analytic Memoing

The process of analytic memoing was employed to capture the reflection and process of inquiry that takes place during the coding process (Saldaña, 2021). When the questionnaires were received the initial data were ready, and this allowed the researcher the ability to identify broad themes. Having the questionnaires that had background statements around the teacher's history provided a helpful in looking at experience and demographics. Categorizing the teachers by experience, gender, subjects taught, or other similar areas helped develop data.

The next step was reviewing the questionnaire statements that dealt with the specific capitals (human, social structural, positive psychological) placed in themes. Connecting the similar statements across the questionnaires then helped not only with giving the overarching codes, but it also helped identify the participants initial understandings as it applied to the Four Capital Theory. After the questionnaire data was reviewed, the initial codes were recorded and my thoughts on what had been identified were listed.

When the first interviews approached the questionnaire data was looked over again and further thoughts were recorded based on if any modifications were needed. The interviews were recorded, but during them I took notes on my initial thoughts of responses, and listed any follow up questions based on the answers that were given. After the interview for each I made sure to add my initial wonderings and then also record what themes I heard come up based on the responses the teachers gave. I then took a one-day break and recorded my initial thoughts after the fact before listening to the interviews again to update my notes on potential themes and codes. After that I added any clarifications that were needed and those questions were added to each teacher's specific second round interview, for the three individuals with two interviews total.

After the interviews were completed and further notation had been recorded, I went over all of my notes and codes and recorded how the data had confirmed these codes and themes and/or how it had changed the overall picture. Using “Zoom” to transcribe the interviews allowed one last inspection of the information when it became available. This made it possible to find key words that were present across the interviews. The overall story of the data was then written allowing for the findings to be constructed in Chapter 5.

External Validity

Having a sample of veteran teachers who had taught for over three years in the school district contributed to the generalizability of this research. Generalizability occurs when a study produces similar results with a different sample of the population (Stephens, 1982). Achieving generalizability was one factor that supported external validity in this study.

Additionally, external validity was supported by the goal of transferability, which refers to the applicability of the data in other contexts (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). The findings are now transferable to other rural districts, enabling the extrapolation of results to similar situations. This will help schools replicate effective strategies revealed by the participants (Ahmed, 2024). By implementing these measures, the study achieved external validity.

Study Sequence

After the proposal defense, this study’s proposal was sent to the IRB at Kansas State University as seen in table 3.3. Following this, the introductory email (Appendix F) was sent through a Midwestern Rural Education Center to establish the initial contact with rural school districts across the Midwest. Once connections with participating districts were confirmed, the initial questionnaire was developed and was distributed to high schools that had agreed to participate in the study.

The questionnaire results were analyzed and were coded to identify eligible participants for the next phase of the study. Selected participants were then contacted via email to schedule interview times. The study included two rounds of semi-structured interviews, for those that selected that option, if not one larger interview session. Once the interviews were completed, the data from both questionnaires and interviews were coded and categorized into themes.

Finally, the identified themes informed the development of implications and recommendations for addressing teacher retention in rural schools. These findings were synthesized into actionable strategies aimed at reducing teacher attrition and supporting rural educators.

Table 3.3. *Study Sequence*

Time	Study Activities
February 2025	Dissertation Proposal Defense
March 2025	Gain approval for research from IRB
March-April 2025	Send recruitment questionnaire to rural high school teachers in the Midwest through the REC
May 2025	Select participants and schedule interviews
June 2025	Conduct Semi-Structured Interview #1
June 2025	Conduct Semi-Structured Interview #2
July-November 2025	Data Analysis
December-February 2026	Draft and Finalize Chapters 4 and 5
March 2026	Defend Dissertation and submit to KSU Graduate School

Summary

This study aims to explore the factors contributing to rural teachers' decisions to remain in the profession for the long term, focusing on strategies to improve teacher retention and

reduce attrition. Grounded in the Four-Capital Theory, the research examines the roles of human, social, structural, and positive psychological capital in shaping teacher retention.

The study employed a qualitative approach, incorporating data collection through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews that gathered input from rural secondary teachers. Data collection occurred in Spring 2025, with findings analyzed and published in Spring 2026. Methodological rigor was ensured through triangulation and purposeful sampling, enhancing the credibility and validity of the research.

Data analysis included the use of coding techniques such as in vivo, open, axial, and focused coding to identify the themes and patterns. Thematic analysis and grounded theory guided the interpretation of the findings. Ultimately, this study seeks to identify trends that encourage rural educators to remain in their roles, providing insights and recommendations to inform policies and practices aimed at strengthening teacher retention in rural schools.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to share results from the questionnaire and interview analyses aimed at answering the primary research question, “What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings?” This chapter is organized to reflect the sequential nature of this study. First the data from the introductory questionnaire will be examined, focusing on the statements that teachers responded to in the four different areas of capital from Mason and Matas (2017). Next, themes identified from the semi-structured interviews will be shared. Ultimately many trends were identified within the work, the interpretation(s) of the data around the research question and sub-questions will be shared in Chapter 5.

Quantitative Results

To gather participants for this study, an email was sent to rural midwestern school districts inviting all willing and eligible participants to fill out the introductory questionnaire. The questionnaire was completely voluntary and was given through the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was designed to gather the teachers general background information which included school location, subjects taught, grades taught, years teaching in total, and specific years taught at their current rural school. Additionally, the questionnaire included a total of 16 questions that covered the four different capitals (human, social, structural, and positive psychological) from Mason and Matas’s Four Capital Theory. For each category on the questionnaire, it had four specific questions. The questions were developed using experts in the field to help gain initial thinking and background on these capitals, using a Likert scale. The teachers could select one of five options, and were quantified as follows, 1- Strong Disagree, 2-

Table 4.1. Overall Questionnaire Results by Four Capital Category

Interviewee	Human Capital	Social Capital	Structural Capital	Positive Psychological Capital	Overall Mean
Jasmine	4.5	4.5	4.75	3.5	4.31
Ariel	3.5	3.75	3.5	4	3.67
Aurora	4.75	5	4.75	4.25	4.69
Merida	3.75	4	4	3.5	3.81
Mirabel	4	4.5	4	4	4.12
Belle	4.75	5	4.75	2.5	4.25
Colette	3.75	4	3.25	3.75	3.69
Anna	3	3.25	3	3.75	3.25
Gaston	4.5	4	4	3.75	4.06
Elsa	2.5	4.25	3.5	2.75	3.25
Capital Mean	3.9	4.23	3.95	3.58	3.91
Standard Deviation	0.76	0.55	0.64	0.55	0.63
Minimum	2.5	3.25	3	2.5	2.81
Maximum	4.75	5	4.75	4.25	4.69

Disagree, 3- Neither Agree or Disagree, 4- Agree, and 5-Strongly Agree (Nemoto & Beglar, 2014). Following the distribution of the email, a total of 25 educators responded; of those, 10 teachers met the study criteria and participated in the research after responding to scheduling requests. The selected participants met the required threshold of at least three years of teaching experience in a rural secondary school and demonstrated a willingness to participate in the interview(s).

The overall results of the questionnaire can be found in Table 4.1. When looking over the data from the table one can see that the ten participants agreed that in their current role their social capital was the area they felt most supported in, having an overall average of 4.23 which falls on the very high range of perceived support. The highest for the area of social capital was a 5 from two teachers, Aurora and Belle, while the lowest total was a 3.25 from Anna. The category that was the lowest for our teachers was the capital of positive-psychological capital with an average of 3.58. Looking into that category we can see that once again Aurora gave the highest average score of a 4.25, while this time Belle provided the lowest average at 2.5.

The remaining two areas of capital, of human and structural capital had averages that were within 0.05 of each other. Human capital had a slightly higher total with 3.95, and structural capital had a 3.90, both of which fall within the high range of perceived support. Two participants had an average of 4.75 for human capital, those teachers being Aurora and Belle, which represents a very high level of perceived support. While looking at structural capital three teachers also had an average of 4.75 those being Jasmine, Aurora, and Belle. The lowest teacher for human capital was Elsa at 2.5 and then for structural capital we see that Anna had the lowest total at a 3.

The notable trends that were identified for the individual responses were that Aurora seemed the most pleased as it pertained to all areas of capital, with her average being a 4.69. Aurora had the highest averages in every single category, so it could be assumed that her experience has been overall extremely positive. The individuals who seemed to be most displeased about the four areas of capital were both Anna and Elsa with an average of 3.25. Anna had all of her averages in the range of 3.00-3.75 placing her generally in the high category of agreement. Then with Elsa her rankings of a 2.5 (human capital), which does appear

to be an outlier compared to the others, and 2.75 (positive psychological capital) brought down her overall average from her other two capitals that were a 4.25 (social capital) and 3.5 (structural capital). With that in mind it could be stated that Anna has had the most overall negative experience with support in the areas of each area of capital. Looking at Elsa it seems that the two capitals of human capital and positive psychological are the major areas she has not been pleased with, the other capitals her answers were much closer to the group mean, with it being a difference of 0.03 for social capital and 0.45 for structural capital.

The standard deviation values further show the participants perceptions across the four types of capital. Social capital and positive psychological capital but have an SD of 0.55, which shows the lowest variability. This could suggest for these two capitals they have relatively similar experiences. Structural capital revealed slightly more variability with the SD being at 0.64, which shows greater differences in how teachers perceived the support. Lastly was human capital which had the highest standard deviation at 0.76. This suggests that the teachers' experiences had the most variability.

The overall results do help to see the overarching results, but to understand each teacher's responses to each question the data does present itself in tables 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5

Human Capital Questionnaire Results

The human capital portion of the questionnaire provided the insights to each teacher's thoughts as it pertained to each statement that was constructed around the title capital. The results of the human capital questionnaire can be found in Table 4.2.

For the first statement, "I feel adequately trained for the tasks required in my role," on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.1. This average shows that the teachers strongly agreed that they are supported in this role as it pertains to their training. This statement had the

Table 4.2. Human Capital Questionnaire Results

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Mean	SD
Jasmine	5	4	5	4	4.5	0.58
Ariel	5	4	4	1	3.5	1.73
Aurora	5	5	5	4	4.75	0.50
Merida	4	4	4	3	3.75	0.50
Mirabel	4	4	4	4	4.00	0.00
Belle	5	4	5	5	4.75	0.50
Colette	5	3	4	3	3.75	0.96
Anna	2	2	4	4	3.00	1.15
Gaston	5	4	5	4	4.5	0.58
Elsa	1	3	4	2	2.5	1.29
Group Mean Response	4.1	3.7	4.4	3.4	3.90	0.78
SD (per question)	1.45	0.82	0.52	1.17	0.76	N/A
Note: Q1: “I feel adequately trained for the tasks required in my role.” Q2: “I feel my workload is manageable.” Q3: “My workplace supports opportunities for my professional growth and development.” Q4: “I believe my school district offers a competitive salary compared to similar districts.”						

largest standard deviation of the human capital grouping at 1.45. This shows that this was where the teachers had a high variability in their feelings of training. Jasmine, Ariel, Aurora, Belle, Colette, and Gaston all chose a “5” for this category showing they felt exceptionally strong support. Elsa was lowest on this statement, choosing a “1” which suggests that she feels very

low support as it pertains to her training, this was the only “1” so it could be considered an outlier in this data.

The second statement, “I feel my workload is manageable,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.6. This average shows that the teachers agree that they have strong support with what is being asked to do with their workload. The standard deviation for this statement was 0.82, which does show moderate variability as it pertains to workload. Aurora once again demonstrated the highest score in this question, giving a “5” showing she felt exceptionally strong support. On the low end we see that Anna had a score of a “2” showing general disagreement on the feelings of support. Both of these individuals were the only ones to choose these options, most individuals on this chose a 3 or a 4.

The third statement, “My workplace supports opportunities for my professional growth and development,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.4. This average shows that teachers strongly agree that they are supported in this role as it pertains to their professional development. The standard deviation for this statement was a 0.52, which is the lowest of all human capital statements. Having this standard deviation shows that all participants have some differences in their perception, but are generally aligned. We see that Jasmine, Aurora, Belle, and Gaston all chose a “5” for this category showing they felt exceptionally strong support. On the contrary all remaining teachers for this statement selected a “4” which still shows a very high level of agreement that they are supported professionally.

The fourth statement, “I believe my school district offers a competitive salary compared to similar districts,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.04. This average shows that the teachers agree that they have moderately strong support with what is being asked to do with their salary being competitive. The standard deviation for this statement was 1.17, this

shows that there is a moderate level of variability amongst the participants' statements regarding salary. Belle was a “5” and was the highest response in this statement, showing that she felt exceptionally strong support for her district’s competitive salary range. Elsa was the lowest having a “2” which shows she generally disagreed that her school district supports her with their competitiveness of their salaries.

When looking at the mean of the entire group human capital overall had a very high sense of support with the average being a 4.01. The teachers average standard deviation was an average of 0.76 which does show noticeable variation and less of a consensus.

Social Capital Questionnaire Results

The social capital portion of the questionnaire provided the insights to each teacher’s thoughts as it pertained to each statement that was constructed around the title capital. The results of the social capital questionnaire can be found in Table 4.3.

For the first statement, “My values align with the values of the school,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.0. This average shows that the teachers strongly agree that they are supported in this role as it pertains to their values aligning with their school. The standard deviation for the first statement of social capital was a 0.67 which demonstrates some differences in teacher’s perceptions, but still generally in alignment. Aurora and Belle both gave this statement a “5” showing they felt exceptionally strong values alignment with their schools and themselves. Anna and Elsa both had scores of a “3” which shows that they felt that they had moderate alignment of their personal values and their school.

For the second statement, “If I were a parent, I would be satisfied with the education provided at my school,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.4. This showed that

Table 4.3. Social Capital Questionnaire Results

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Mean	SD
Jasmine	4	5	5	4	4.5	0.58
Ariel	4	1	5	5	3.75	1.90
Aurora	5	5	5	5	5	0
Merida	4	2	5	5	4	1.41
Mirabel	4	4	5	5	4.5	0.58
Belle	5	5	5	5	5	0
Colette	4	4	4	4	4	0
Anna	3	2	4	4	3.25	0.96
Gaston	4	2	5	5	4	1.41
Elsa	3	4	5	5	4.25	0.96
Group Mean Response	4	3.4	4.8	4.7	4.23	0.78
SD (per question)	0.67	1.51	0.42	0.48	0.55	N/A

Note: Q1: “My values align with the values of the school.” Q2: “If I were a parent, I would be satisfied with the education provided at my school.” Q3: “If needed, my immediate superior would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns.” Q4: “If needed, my co-workers would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns.”

on average most people generally agreed that they would be happy with the education their school provided if they were parents. The standard deviation for this particular statement was a 1.51, which happened to be the largest standard deviation for all four of the capital’s statements. The standard deviation showed that there were some very different perceptions that were present for the teachers' answers. Looking at the top responders we see that Aurora and Belle both gave this statement a “5” showing they felt exceptionally strong beliefs that their

schools would please them with the education given. Ariel was the lowest on this particular statement with the response of a “1,” showing that she strongly disagreed with the quality of education given at her school if she was a parent.

For the third statement, “If needed, my immediate superior would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.8. This average was the highest average of all areas of the questionnaire, narrowly beating out the 4.7 of the next (fourth) statement for social capital. This high average shows that our teachers show exceptionally strong feelings that their immediate supervisor would listen to their complaints. The standard deviation of 0.42 is tied with the fourth statement from positive psychological capital as the lowest standard deviation figure. This standard deviation demonstrates that the participants have a strong similarity in their responses with minimal difference in their beliefs. All participants but two, Anna and Colette, had a “5” down for this statement, showing they felt exceptionally strong beliefs that their supervisor would listen to their work-related concerns. Anna and Colette both had the score of a “4,” which still demonstrates a strong agreement with this statement overall.

For the fourth statement, “If needed, my co-workers would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.7. This total, as stated before, is the second highest average for our teachers, showing that they exceptionally agree that their co-workers would listen to their concerns. The standard deviation was a 0.48 which is the second lowest standard deviation figure when compared to the third statement of social capital and fourth statement of positive psychological capital. This standard deviation demonstrates that the participants have a strong similarity in their responses with minimal difference in their beliefs. For this section all participants, except Jasmine, Colette, and Anna,

selected the score of a “5,” showing they felt exceptionally strong beliefs that their coworkers would listen to their work-related concerns. Jasmine, Colette, and Anna selected the score of a “4” showing that they still strongly agreed with the statement.

When looking at the overall results of this section, a 4.23 average, it is clear that the high responses showed teachers very highly agreed with their current district's support for them as it pertains to social capital. The standard deviation average for the entire section was a 0.55 showing that there was some variation but still a general alignment. However, one item of note is that two teachers, Aurora and Belle, had “5” for each question in this capital, demonstrating exceptionally strong feelings of support as it pertains to social capital.

Structural Capital Questionnaire Results

The structural capital portion of the questionnaire provided the insights to each teacher's thoughts as it pertained to each statement that was constructed around the title capital. The results of the structural capital questionnaire can be found in Table 4.4.

For the first statement, “I have the ability to influence decisions that affect my work,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 4.3. This average demonstrates a very strong agreement with the statement that teachers have the ability to influence the decisions that affect their work. The standard deviation for this statement was 0.68, showing some differences in perceptions, but still general alignment in their stance on this statement. Jasmine, Merida, Aurora, and Belle all selected a “5” showing exceptionally strong feelings of agreement with this statement. Colette was the lowest participant with this question, giving a “3,” which represented neutral feelings towards this statement.

For the second statement, “I feel I have the necessary tools and resources to be successful in my job,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.9. This average demonstrates a

Table 4.4. Structural Capital Questionnaire Results

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Mean	SD
Jasmine	5	5	5	4	4.75	0.5
Ariel	4	4	3	3	3.5	0.58
Aurora	5	5	4	5	4.75	0.5
Merida	5	4	4	3	4	0.82
Mirabel	4	4	4	4	4	0
Belle	5	5	5	4	4.75	0.5
Colette	3	3	3	4	3.25	0.5
Anna	4	2	2	4	3	1.16
Gaston	4	4	4	4	4	0
Elsa	4	3	3	4	3.5	0.58
Group Mean Response	4.3	3.9	3.7	3.9	3.95	0.51
SD (per question)	0.68	0.99	0.95	0.57	0.64	N/A
Note: Q1: “I have the ability to influence decisions that affect my work.” Q2: “I feel I have the necessary tools and resources to be successful in my job.” Q3: “My school has the necessary facilities and technology to support student learning. Q4: “The policies and procedures at my school are appropriate to support effective learning.”						

strong agreement by our participants that they feel like they have the tools to be successful in their job(s). The standard deviation for this statement was 0.99, this demonstrates that there is noticeable variation in the responses. The highest participants' responses were from Jasmine, Aurora, and Belle who all had a “5” indicating an exceptionally high agreement to this statement. The lowest score was given by Anna, who selected a “2” showing that she had a low level of agreement with the statement.

For the third statement, “My school has the necessary facilities and technology to support student learning,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.7. This average demonstrates a strong agreement by our participants that they feel like their school has the necessary facilities and technology. The standard deviation for this statement was a 0.95, this demonstrates that there is noticeable variation in the responses. The highest participants' responses were from Jasmine and Belle who both had a “5” indicating an exceptionally high agreement to this statement. The lowest score was once again given by Anna who selected a “2” showing that she had a low level of agreement with the statement.

For the fourth statement, “The policies and procedures at my school are appropriate to support effective learning,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.9. This average demonstrates a strong agreement by our participants that their school has effective policies and procedures in place. The standard deviation for this statement was a 0.57, showing some differences in perceptions, but still general alignment in their stance on this statement. Aurora provided our highest response on this statement, giving a “5” indicating an exceptionally high agreement to this statement. Ariel and Merida both gave a score of “3” for this statement, demonstrating a moderate level of agreement with this statement regarding facility and technology support at their schools.

For this capital we saw that for all four statements the teachers had an overall average of 3.95, which shows strong agreement overall that their school supports their structural capital. With the standard deviation average for this capital being 0.64 we do see that there is variation amongst the teacher's answers and but still general alignment. Jasmine, Aurora, and Belle all had notably high responses in this section, with a 4.75, demonstrating that they all had an exceptional level of agreement with each statement around structural capital.

Positive Psychological Capital Questionnaire Results

The positive psychological capital portion of the questionnaire provided the insights to each teacher's thoughts as it pertained to each statement that was constructed around the title capital. The results of the positive psychological capital questionnaire can be found in Table 4.5.

For the first statement, "My work responsibilities influence the balance between my professional and personal life," on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.5. This

Table 4.5. *Positive Psychological Capital Questionnaire Results*

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Mean	SD
Jasmine	3	4	3	4	3.5	0.58
Ariel	4	4	4	4	4	0
Aurora	5	5	3	4	4.25	0.96
Merida	2	4	4	4	3.5	1
Mirabel	4	4	4	4	4	0
Belle	4	1	2	3	2.5	1.29
Colette	4	4	3	4	3.75	0.50
Anna	4	4	3	4	3.75	0.50
Gaston	4	2	5	4	3.75	1.26
Elsa	1	2	5	3	2.75	1.71
Group Mean Response	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.8	3.58	0.78
SD	1.18	1.27	0.97	0.42	0.55	N/A

Note: Q1: My work responsibilities influence the balance between my professional and personal life. Q2: My school is concerned with the health and wellbeing of its staff. Q3: I plan to continue teaching until I am eligible to retire. Q4: I feel motivated to perform my work duties.

average demonstrates that there is a general level of agreement with this statement by our participants. The standard deviation for this statement was 1.18, which shows a moderate level of variability in the responses of our participants. Aurora for this statement gave the score of a “5” showing her exceptional level of agreement with the balance between professional and personal life. Elsa gave a score of a “1” showing a strong level of disagreement with this statement.

For the second statement, “My school is concerned with the health and wellbeing of its staff,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.4. This average shows that the teachers have a general agreement that they will remain teachers until they are able to retire. The standard deviation for this statement was a 1.27, which shows a significant level of variability in the responses of our participants. Aurora once again gave the score of a “5” showing an exceptional level of agreement that her school is concerned with hers and her peers' overall well-being. Belle gave a score of a “1” showing a strong level of disagreement with this statement.

For the third statement, “I plan to continue teaching until I am eligible to retire,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.6. This average shows us that the teachers have a high level of agreement that they will remain teachers until they are able to retire. The standard deviation for this statement was a 0.97, which shows noticeable variation between the responses of our participants. Gaston and Elsa for this statement gave the score of a “5” showing their exceptional level of agreement with the statement they will remain a teacher until they retire. Belle gave a score of “2” demonstrating a moderately low level of agreement with the statement.

For the fourth statement, “I feel motivated to perform my work duties,” on the five-point scale the average response was a 3.8. This average demonstrates a strong agreement that they feel motivated to perform their duties as educators. The standard deviation for this statement was

0.42, which tied the third statement of the social capital theory for the lowest standard deviation total. This standard deviation demonstrates that the participants have a strong similarity in their responses with minimal difference in their beliefs. All participants gave a score of a “4,” besides Belle and Elsa, showing a very high agreement with their motivation levels to perform their duties. Belle and Elsa each gave a score of a “3,” still showing a general agreement with the statement that was given.

The overall average in this capital was a 3.58, which is the lowest of all four capitals. Despite it being the lowest average capital, the overall statements were moderately agreed upon by all of our teachers. The standard deviation of 0.55 for this section does show variability amongst the answers and but still general alignment. Elsa’s responses were ones that demonstrated a wide range of variance as she had the scores of 1, 2, 3, and 5.

Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Results

Interviews with the ten participating teachers (Table 4.6) revealed eleven recurring themes that were mentioned by multiple respondents. Table 4.7 identifies which themes emerged from each individual teacher. Table 4.8 presents the eleven major themes, along with explanations and anchor quotes to provide additional clarity. Table 4.9 displays the frequency of responses associated with each theme, indicating how many quotes were identified within each category. These themes collectively inform the overarching findings and implications of the study, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Table 4.6. *Teachers by Grade-Level and Subject Taught.*

Teacher Name	Grade-Levels Taught	Subject Areas
Jasmine	9th-12th	Spanish, Journalism, Graphic Arts, Math
Ariel	7th-9th	Math and Robotics
Aurora	5th-11th	Math
Merida	7th-12th	Business
Mirabel	9th-12th	Spanish
Belle	6th-12th	Math and Science
Collette	K-12	Special Education
Anna`	11th-12th	ELA
Gaston	9th-12th	Social Studies
Elsa	9th-12th	Social Studies

Table 4.7. *Theme Responses by Teacher*

Theme	Jasmine	Ariel	Aurora	Merida	Mirabel	Belle	Colette	Anna	Gaston	Elsa
Proximity to Home		X	X			X		X		X
Instructional Load and Capacity Strain	X	X	X	X			X	X		
Work–Home Boundary Challenges for Rural Educators	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Compensation Constraints in Small Rural Systems and Its Impact on Teachers	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X
Small Classes as a Sustaining Force for Rural Teachers	X	X	X	X		X		X		
Supportive Leadership in Rural Schools	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Instructional Autonomy as a Contributor to Teacher Satisfaction		X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Supportive Collegial Relationships	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
Relational Embeddedness in Rural Schools	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Building Strong Student–Teacher Relationships	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Professional Trust and Autonomy in Rural Contexts		X		X			X	X	X	

Table 4.8. *Sustaining Forces and Structural Tensions by Theme*

Category	Category Definition	Theme	Theme Definition	Exemplar Quote
Sustaining Forces	Conditions and relational/professional dynamics that nourish teachers' commitment to rural teaching by fostering belonging, meaning, trust, and perceived impact.	Proximity to Home	Being able to live near family/hometown (often with short commutes), supporting family life and a sense of "being at home."	"It is my hometown, and so I do like the location." (Elsa)
		Small Classes as a Sustaining Force for Rural Teachers	Smaller student–teacher ratios that make relationships deeper and allow teachers to adjust instruction to students' needs.	"I can build relationships with almost every kid." (Elsa)
		Supportive Leadership in Rural Schools	Leadership that provides trust, advocacy, responsiveness, and practical/emotional support that helps teachers remain effective and stay.	"You go. I'll be in and I'll cover your class." (Jasmine)
		Instructional Autonomy as a Contributor to Teacher Satisfaction	Flexibility and professional discretion to design/adapt curriculum and instruction in ways that fit students and context.	"I have a lot of freedom to do exactly what I want in the classroom." (Belle)
		Supportive Collegial Relationships	Collegial relationships characterized by collaboration, mutual aid, and emotional support in a small-staff environment.	"Here, it's been pretty helpful having teachers that I can joke around... vent to." (Gaston)
		Relational Embeddedness in Rural Schools	Feeling welcomed, known, and supported by the community and	"Most of the community has been really welcoming." (Merida)

Category	Category Definition	Theme	Theme Definition	Exemplar Quote
Structural Tensions	Systemic conditions of rural schooling that create persistent strain or tradeoffs often tied to staffing, funding, time, and role expectations making the work harder to sustain over time.		families; shared responsibility for schooling and student wellbeing.	
		Building Strong Student–Teacher Relationships	Strong, often multi-year relationships with students that create purpose, fulfillment, and motivation to remain.	“That’s why, you know, I do this.” (Gaston)
		Professional Trust and Autonomy in Rural Contexts	Preference for rural settings due to perceived trust, autonomy, collegiality, and less micromanagement than non-rural contexts.	“I like teaching rural communities.” (Merida)
		Instructional Load and Capacity Strain	Role compression: teaching multiple subjects/grade levels due to small enrollment and limited staffing, increasing planning load and stress.	“I have 6 preps.” (Aurora)
		Work–Home Boundary Challenges for Rural Educators	Blurred boundaries and time strain from planning demands, extracurricular “many hats,” and community visibility that extend work beyond contract hours.	“It cuts into their family time.” (Jasmine)
		Compensation Constraints in Small Rural Systems and Its Impact on Teachers	Compensation constraints and financial pressure, sometimes intensified by commuting or the need to take on extra duties to supplement income.	“I can make a heck of a lot more money doing something other than teaching.” (Jasmine)

Table 4.9. Total Quotes by Theme

Code	Definition	Frequency
Supportive Leadership in Rural Schools	Leadership that provides trust, advocacy, responsiveness, and practical/emotional support that helps teachers remain effective and stay.	19
Relational Embeddedness in Rural Schools	Feeling welcomed, known, and supported by the community and families; shared responsibility for schooling and student wellbeing.	16
Building Strong Student–Teacher Relationships	Strong, often multi-year relationships with students that create purpose, fulfillment, and motivation to remain.	13
Professional Trust and Autonomy in Rural Contexts	Preference for rural settings due to perceived trust, autonomy, collegiality, and less micromanagement than non-rural contexts.	11
Small Classes as a Sustaining Force for Rural Teachers	Smaller student–teacher ratios that make relationships deeper and allow teachers to adjust instruction to students’ needs.	7
Compensation Constraints in Small Rural Systems and Its Impact on Teachers	Compensation constraints and financial pressure, sometimes intensified by commuting or the need to take on extra duties to supplement income.	7
Supportive Collegial Relationships	Collegial relationships characterized by collaboration, mutual aid, and emotional support in a small-staff environment.	7
Work–Home Boundary Challenges for Rural Educators	Blurred boundaries and time strain from planning demands, extracurricular “many hats,” and community visibility that extend work beyond contract hours.	7
Instructional Autonomy as a Contributor to Teacher Satisfaction	Flexibility and professional discretion to design/adapt curriculum and instruction in ways that fit students and context.	6
Instructional Load and Capacity Strain	Role compression: teaching multiple subjects/grade levels due to small enrollment and limited staffing, increasing planning load and stress.	6
Proximity to Home	Being able to live near family/hometown (often with short commutes), supporting family life and a sense of “being at home.”	5

Table 4.10. *Categorized Teacher Interview Written Statements*

Theme	Teacher	Statement
Structural Tensions		
Instructional Load & Capacity Strain	Ariel	I have multiple preps (seven next year).
	Gaston	Overworked / too many responsibilities.
	Aurora	One has to wear many hats.
	Merida	Home drama becomes classroom drama.
	Colette	Teachers must do more due to population decline.
	Belle	Expectation to be highly involved.
Work–Home Boundary Challenges	Mirabel	People know more about you than you may want.
	Merida	Family conflicts spill into the classroom.
	Belle	Hard to separate work/personal life.
	Belle	Challenges with highly involved families.
	Elsa	Being watched closely; lack of privacy; double standards.
	Jasmine	Financial pressure affects boundaries.
	Merida	Family dynamics affecting school.
Compensation Constraints	Aurora	Roles spill socially in small communities.
	Gaston	Low pay.
	Jasmine	Financial issues.
	Ariel	Funding is always an issue.
	Colette	Population decline affects pay/resources.
	Anna	Lack of money/resources/technology.
Relational Embeddedness (Tension)	Merida	The community seems excluded from cities around them.

Theme	Teacher	Statement
Small Classes (Tension Component) Structural Resource Limitations	Merida	Issues between families influence school.
	Ariel	Perceptions outsiders have of rural schools.
	Elsa	Limited culture; misconceptions about urban settings.
	Aurora	Small classes can become sibling-like in behavior.
	Colette	Not equal in terms of resources.
	Anna	Lack of specialized classes for advanced students.
	Jasmine	Limited options for students' classes and activities.
	Jasmine	Resources issues in general.
Sustaining Forces	Elsa	Technology and basic supplies are lacking.
	Proximity to Home	
	Aurora	Close to my family and children.
	Elsa	Close to home.
	Belle	I live close to my family and my husband's family.
	Small Classes	
	Merida	Small class sizes.
	Jasmine	Small class sizes.
	Anna	Fairly small class sizes (6–25 students).
	Ariel	Small class sizes.
	Mirabel	My class sizes are nice.
	Elsa	Build relationships with most students.
	Supportive Leadership	
	Ariel	I have direct access to administration.
	Mirabel	My school is not on lockdown five times a day.
Instructional Autonomy	Gaston	Safety/security compared to larger schools.
	Mirabel	I choose the curriculum I want.
	Merida	Autonomy in the classroom.

Theme	Teacher	Statement
Relational Embeddedness (Positive)	Anna	Freedom/autonomy with curriculum.
	Colette	Parents are involved.
	Belle	Involved with my own children's education.
	Jasmine	Supportive community.
	Colette	Know everyone / shared ownership.
	Aurora	Being a vital part of the community.
	Aurora	School/community is one big family.
	Elsa	Unity of town.
	Belle	Being involved with community/kids' education.
	Anna	Closeness to the community.
Student–Teacher Relationships	Merida	Relationship building is easy.
	Gaston	Getting to know a majority of students.
	Ariel	Easier to build relationships with students.
	Jasmine	Strong student–teacher relationships.
	Anna	Positive student relationships.
	Elsa	Build relationships with most students.
	Belle	Knowing students while teaching 6–12.

Structural Tensions

Rural teachers often face obstacles that arise not from personal shortcomings or isolated challenges, but from the broader organizational and contextual conditions of their school districts. In this study, these issues are conceptualized as structural tension, system-level factors such as high instructional loads, blurred work-home boundaries, and limited financial resources that lie largely outside teachers' control. The structural tensions only intensify the demands placed on teacher's daily duties, making them work harder and having to make professional and personal compromises. Participants described how pressures shaped their experiences, and often pointed out difficulty with having to balance high expectations placed upon them, with limited resources. When tensions outweigh the sustaining forces that typically support rural educators, teachers may begin to question their desire to remain in the role they have in their current rural school district. The themes that follow illustrate how these structural tensions manifested in teachers' lived experiences.

Instructional Load and Capacity Strain

Instructional Load and Capacity Strain represents how teachers' desire to help students can clash with the reality of structural obstacles, most notably the number of course preparations they were required to teach. Participants described a tension between their commitment to serving the full range of students in small rural schools and the professional demands associated with teaching multiple preparations or "preps." A "prep" refers to the number of distinct courses a teacher prepares and teaches. In rural districts, small enrollments often require teachers to cover numerous subjects or grade levels, a structure that enables broad student access but stretches instructional capacity and places substantial demands on the teachers.

In this study, six of the ten participants cited a high number of preps as a professional challenge. This finding aligns with Leech et al. (2023), who noted that rural teachers are often required to teach multiple subjects and/or grade levels. Not only was the strain stemming from the instructional load asked of them but also the demand to give a high-quality education across all of those preparations. As Ariel explained, "If there was a way to give us fewer preps but I'm not quite sure how you manage that when we have a student body grades 6 through 12 is about a hundred students." While Ariel acknowledged that reducing preps could alleviate stress, she also recognized the logistical difficulty, as few others in the community may be qualified to teach her courses.

Teachers also brought up that the tension was challenging to manage in their professional role. For instance, Anna recalled when she was required to teach 6th, 7th, and 8th grade ELA courses in addition to electives it was "A lot of planning to do and that was really hard." This aligns with research that supports that additional preparations can increase stress levels and exhaustion over time (Fry & Anderson, 2011). Similarly, Jasmine stated that she has had to adapt to teaching multiple preparations, but with her being a veteran teacher this could be a major challenge for new teachers with the same expectations, she further questioned if this could hurt a school district's ability to retain those teachers. Colette in her written statement, as shown in table 4.10, "Teachers must do more due to population decline." So, teachers are additionally becoming exhausted because of the requirements stemming from issues in the community as well.

Aurora brought up that she has discussed what she has experienced with her siblings that are in different, larger, districts and they were shocked that her school didn't have a curriculum specialist or that she might not have another teacher in her building that teaches the same subject,

she stated “I don’t have another person who teaches math, I am it.” Aurora’s discussion with her family members shows that most professionals in the field of education might be wanting different structural supports in place to help alleviate the stress and burden of teaching so many individual preps.

Teachers have also noted that the demands placed on them can also be outside of their regular teaching responsibilities, as teachers have consistently described having to wear “Many hats.” Teachers have been asked to also assist in other roles outside of their normal certified areas with Merida expressing some need for flexibility as she stated “I’ve gotten to sub in other classes... I’ve been an English teacher, social studies teacher, and even a band teacher.” Some teachers could view this just as a normal aspect of being a smaller rural school educator, but others did acknowledge these requests and expectations can “wear on” teachers as Collette pointed out.

Ultimately, *Instructional Load and Capacity Strain* describes items that go beyond the number of preparations that a rural teacher might have. If the responsibilities that teachers are given outweighs their perceived ability to manage them it could have a negative impact on their desire to remain in their current school. Structural barriers in rural schools both elevate teachers’ workload and heighten their stress, contributing to the lower retention rates observed in these settings.

Work–Home Boundary Challenges for Rural Educators

Work–Home Boundary Challenges for Rural Educators refers to the difficulties that teachers face when not having separation between their professional and personal lives. The demands placed on rural educators to fill different roles, as previously discussed, can create

additional pressure on them to have to bring those burdens and workloads home with them. It is important for rural educators to find balance because maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life is closely tied to job satisfaction (Padma & Reddy, 2014).

In this study, seven teachers discussed that tensions did exist between their work lives and their personal responsibilities, identifying that there are boundary strains that consistently exist in their current rural setting. While one participant, Belle, did describe that she enjoyed the challenge of taking on different roles in her school, the majority of teachers stated that the issues of long hours, limited planning time, and the number of expectations that were placed on them had a negative impact on them.

A major contributor to the work-home boundary challenges is the lack of sufficient plan time, thus resulting in teachers needing to work into their evenings and weekends. Anna emphasized how difficult it is to achieve the desired balance between work and personal life when she cannot accomplish the necessary items explaining “I think having time to balance your life and school. I think that's one of the biggest things just anywhere, having time to plan.” Gaston similarly shared how insufficient planning time forced him to construct materials on his own, “I was making everything on my own, and I was spending almost all day on Saturday and most of the day on Sunday still working.” Additionally, Belle warned that pressures accumulate quickly in small districts, “I think it's easy to get burned out very, very quickly in small districts. I like the challenge. But, life gets busy, and other people maybe wouldn't like that.” Such experiences align with research indicating that a lack of planning time has been shown to negatively affect teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness (Westling & Whitten, 1996).

Teachers also described that the professional expectations can extend beyond their contracted time and that the volume can be overwhelming. Jasmine highlighted this specifically explaining, “It cuts into their family time and those are all things that eventually get to you.” The constraints placed on teachers be it grading, lesson planning, attending meetings, sponsoring clubs, and/or coaching sports really makes the line between work and professional life quite blurry. Aurora explains that teachers share the burden of covering all the additional events and duties that go with their jobs, but it still does take its toll as a tension:

Every sport that needs coaching and like, I said, every sponsorship, and after school care after school care for us is run by our teachers, too. You need to volunteer, so not one person's doing it all the time, because you don't want to burn them out.

The social construct of smaller rural communities is one that means privacy is more limited. Mirabel explained how living in the smaller community can further blur the professional and personal lines within the community. Mirabel stated, “People know so much more about you than what you might want them to know,” for teachers that are not comfortable with this it could negatively impact their willingness to remain in that type of social environment. Aurora wrote that “Role’s spill socially in small communities,” so the struggle of trying to set up and maintain boundaries was also something that she found difficult.

Another complication of work-life balance is communities that have geographic and housing constraints. Teachers that cannot find or afford the housing in an area often are forced to commute long distances, further reducing their personal time. Merida described the toll that this took “A lot of us drive anywhere between 25 to 45 min to get to work and just that takes a toll on your home life.” This aligns with that finding from Lowe that stated a way to recruit and retain teachers is to provide close and affordable housing for them (2006). Some school districts have tried to mitigate this problem. Belle for example expressed one of the positive items regarding

her district was that homes were owned by the district for teacher use she said “Our district also owns several homes in the community, available for teachers who need them.”

Despite the challenges one participant did highlight her enjoyment of having a variety of roles and the shared responsibilities her and her colleagues undertake. But still the prevailing pattern does seem to suggest that when these boundary pressures exist and remain unchecked, it does contribute further to teacher stress and potentially retention issues.

Compensation Constraints in Small Rural Systems and Its Impact on Teachers

Compensation Constraints in Small Rural Systems and Its Impact on Teachers refers to the limited financial resources that rural school districts often face. Items such as low enrollment, restricted state funding, and lower tax revenue are items that can ultimately lead to lower teacher salaries when compared to suburban or urban districts. Educators nationwide typically struggle with low pay compared to professions that require a similar amount of education level, rural teachers face even great compensation disparities. When the pay rate falls short of their economic needs, it might force teachers to have to take on additional roles, find outside employment, or even leave the profession of teaching entirely.

In this study teachers described salary issues as a means to potentially impact their sustainability to remain a teacher. Elsa captured this when she stated “I think some more of the challenges is definitely pay. We just don’t have the money to pay like others do.” Her comment reflects a reality of many rural schools' problems with not having the funding creating a tension that negatively impacts teacher salaries.

A direct constraint that regularly impacts rural schools is low or even declining populations, Colette illustrated this when she made a connection that school districts officials have a very difficult job when she stated “How are you going to afford to even give any kind of

value or pay raise when your numbers are so small, when you have only 28 students in your high school?”

In addition to the problems that can stem from enrollment numbers, many teachers are forced to commute greater distances from their homes to their workplace. These longer commutes do put an additional financial burden on teachers and the rising costs can negatively impact them. Merida states that for her specifically the monthly costs do add up, she stated “Our income isn't necessarily high enough to support those of us who spend \$400 on gas every month.”

With this in mind, many rural teachers feel the need to find ways to supplement their income, often taking on additional roles in their schools. Ariel explained, “If you want to increase your salary, you have to take on additional roles and that starts to get really wearing as well.” Despite the extra paid stipends, teachers still consider pay rates as a major factor when deciding whether to teach in a rural district. Gaston shared that in an even smaller school compared to his current one he was earning \$15,000 less per year, which played a significant factor in his decision to find a new district.

The issues become especially difficult for teachers that are trained in high demand fields such as science and math, who often have access to better paying career alternatives outside education. Jasmine emphasized this dynamic “I can make a heck of a lot more money doing something other than teaching.” Lower compensation also influences new teachers in the profession, Anna reflected on a new teacher who recently chose not to remain in the profession, explaining, “I think it was just overwhelming for her as she was sponsoring FBLA [Future Business Leaders of America] and coaching multiple sports. She'd make more money elsewhere.” Anna’s observation shows how salary, particularly when combined with heavy

workloads, can influence new teachers' decisions about whether teaching is a sustainable long-term profession in rural settings.

All of these insights demonstrate that compensation constraints in small rural systems are a systematic issue. When rural districts cannot offer competitive salaries to help offset the demands of teachers' personal finances they could face recruitment and retention issues with both new and experienced teachers.

Sustaining Forces

With rural educators navigating a range of structural tensions that further complicate their work, they also described sustaining forces that anchor them to their schools and communities. In this study, sustaining forces refer to the professional, relational, and contextual features of rural teaching that provide stability and personal fulfillment. Participants consistently emphasized that the positive factors not only enhance their day-to-day experiences but help shape their desire to be committed long term to their respective rural district. The following themes illustrate how these sustaining forces function in teachers' lives, reinforcing their sense of belonging, purpose, and professional satisfaction.

Proximity to Home

Proximity to Home refers to the extent to which teachers live near the communities in which they work, including close proximity to family, an understanding of the local community and culture, and their ability to raise their children in that school district. The benefit of a rural district in this regard is that it does often have strong social ties, a sense of belonging, and the potential to raise their families in that local environment. The sense of home that teachers experience in their communities can be a big factor in their desire to remain a teacher in their local school district.

In this study, participants frequently described how working near home helped shape both their choice to teach in a rural district and their decisions to stay. Aurora's experience highlights how growing up and raising a family in a rural community became closely linked with her career. As a math teacher in a small 1A school, which is defined by the Kansas State High School Activities Association (2025) as serving 12 to 106 students Aurora shared "I have been teaching in my current 1A school for 18 years, which is my home district for my children." For Aurora, parenting and teaching in the same community helped reinforce her commitment to remain in the district, sharing that proximity to home supports her continuity and sense of belonging.

Belle similarly emphasized how raising young children influenced her choice on where to work. After working for five years in a district 30 miles away from her family home, she ultimately chose to teach closer to where she lived: "When my oldest child was ready to start preschool we wanted to take him to the school district that we lived in." This demonstrates how proximity allows teachers to merge family life with professional responsibilities, which is especially important in rural regions where school and community relationships are often closely intertwined.

Several teachers described how familiarity and a feeling of embeddedness within the community helped them feel a sense of rootedness, Elsa simply stated, "It is my hometown, and so I do like the location." Anna echoed this sentiment stating "Living close to family and being able to have a decent job like where I'm close to family and don't have to move to a completely new environment." Being in a community which provides personal and emotional support can help to buffer the challenges of living in a rural community.

Beyond those potential feelings of support and personal connections, there are some more simple and practical reasons that appeal to teachers. Despite potential opportunities elsewhere, Ariel emphasized the benefits of a short commute “I just live 15 min from the school, you don't have to spend two hours in the car.” The ability to live near one’s school can therefore play a role in teacher retention. Showing that feeling “at home” and connected to the community are important factors for many educators' decision to work in rural school districts.

These accounts demonstrate that proximity to home is a stabilizing factor in teacher’s professional lives with emotional connection, a sense of belonging, and convenience. Teachers that grew up in a rural community or chose to raise their family in a rural community often cite a deep connection to that place and it helps outweigh the potential cons of a rural lifestyle choice.

Small Classes as a Sustaining Force for Rural Teachers

Small Classes as a Sustaining Force for Rural Teachers sizes, refers to the overall smaller school enrollment numbers compared to suburban or urban school districts. While many obstacles exist, having smaller class sizes did emerge as a sustaining force, contributing to teacher’s job satisfaction, instructional effectiveness, and personal connections to their students.

The relational advantages of small classes were highlighted by teachers that were interviewed. Anna emphasized how having smaller groups of students foster meaningful student-teacher relationships stating “I've had positive relationships with students, and having fairly small class sizes is helpful to kids just being in the same area.” Anna’s statement illustrates how smaller class room numbers can make a positive impact allowing teachers to build stronger relationships and help build supportive learning environments. Jasmine further reinforced this point saying “We've got smaller class sizes in the rural schools that allows us the freedom to be able to make those kinds of relationships stronger than maybe some of the bigger

schools.” These relational benefits are important to help counter balance the demands that rural schools place on teachers, stronger relationships can help motivate teachers and help increase their sense of purpose and professional fulfillment.

Smaller enrollment numbers can also influence teachers’ personal experiences in positive ways. Aurora discussed how she was able to have a personal impact on her own family, as she was able to teach all four of her children and coach them. This ability to be both a teacher and a mother to her children in this school district not only strengthened her connection to the school district, but also the community.

Participants also highlighted how small classes support instructional flexibility and responsiveness. Belle shared that having smaller numbers in her classes allowed her to adapt more quickly to her students' needs, “There were 22 in the Junior High 6th through 8th grade and so there's also a lot of ability for us as a school to adjust to the needs of the students.” Belle’s comment reveals a theme that in rural settings a small scale can help elicit personalized learning and more adaptive processes that can be difficult to achieve in larger classes.

For teachers that work in more specialized roles, like in special education, small class sizes can provide a tremendous benefit. Ariel, a special education teacher, further emphasized the ability to support individuals when she said, “We have about a 1 to 6 ratio, which is a very low ratio.” Such ratios allow for more specific individualized interventions, ability to monitor student progress, and overall stronger relationships with the student and their families.

These experiences help show that small class sizes do serve as an important sustaining factor for rural teachers. The benefits such as relational development, instructional flexibility, and ability to modify instruction for students come from having smaller classroom sizes. These

positive items can help out weigh the cons of rural school setting and help keep teachers in their schools and communities.

Supportive Leadership in Rural Schools

Supportive Leadership in Rural Schools refers to the actions, attitudes, and structures provided by school administrators that help teachers feel valued and empowered in their roles. Supportive leaders offer guidance, availability, assistance, and help to create conditions that enhance teacher well-being. Research shows that strong leadership within schools has been shown to contribute significantly to overall school success (Ni et al., 2018). Having supportive leadership in place at rural schools can further help shape the positive day to day experiences that teachers experience.

Across all interviews in this study, teachers identified supportive leadership as a crucial factor influencing their satisfaction and longevity in rural education. Participants described administrators who actively sought solutions, provided resources, and recognized teaching efforts. Belle emphasized this resourcefulness in describing her administrator's ability to creatively stretch limited funding: "I can credit administration with being very resourceful...able to come up with some creative ideas to either make money stretch or get more money coming in."

Beyond trying to secure funding, teachers valued the leaders who offered constructive feedback and viewed teachers as individuals whom they would collaborate with. Gaston noted feeling encouraged after an evaluation noting "Whenever they came in to do an observation, they were trying to find positive things, they were always very supportive." The feeling of being supported is an important item to take note of here, in this case Gaston felt that his administrators were allies in helping him grow in his professional goals.

The feeling of support in classroom management is another item that came up with supportive leadership in mind. Ariel contrasted her previous principal team with her current one stating that "I know that she will back me up if I have issues in the classroom where, before I was not backed up at all." Being able to feel that your leaders in your school are in your corner ready to back you up is an item that cannot be ignored as helping teachers feel empowered.

Teachers highlighted the importance of administrator availability, especially in small rural schools where leaders additionally have to take on many roles. Elsa appreciated her administrators being willing to step in and help when needed, recalling "If I need to be gone for 15 minutes, they will babysit my class." Jasmine similarly discussed the importance of administrative availability when dealing with family medical needs, noting that her administration made themselves accessible and supportive during that time "My principal said, you go. I'll be in and I'll cover your class. I can't tell you how many times he did that. Those are the kinds of things...we sort of take care of each other." Jasmine further emphasized the importance of empathetic leadership, explaining that "I think it helps to have administrators who understand what the teachers are going through." The leaders that Elsa and Jasmine described are ones that can help their teachers know that they are valued as humans with needs and not just viewed as an employee, this can help the sense of belonging that one feels in their school.

Ultimately, administrators must also be available to both teachers and students. Aurora illustrated this level of involvement by describing administrators who take on multiple roles, stating that "Not only are they the principal that day, then they drive, go, get the bus, coach their games, and then drive back home as bus drivers." The principals showing that they are there to support not only the teachers, but students, and even families to make sure the students are taken care of is one that demonstrates the selflessness of rural school leaders.

Support often can extend beyond the school day and even the work week. Mirabel described texting her principal early on a Sunday morning about a storm approaching the school and the fear her class windows were left open and the principal immediately responded back that they would go check. The level of availability reinforced her confidence in the support that her administration gives her.

Elsa added that administrative support also includes providing emotional support, explaining that at times she simply needs a space for emotional support and that her administration functions as a team that allows for this type of open dialogue. She recalled that, “I had a couple of times where I just went into an office, and said I need to complain. They said, okay, and I did, and I think that that's really positive.”

Having empathetic leadership like this is one that contributes to a school climate in which teachers feel understood and respected. Mirabel also emphasized that her administration is consistently available and makes time for her when needed, stating, “I have always been able to go talk to them. If they're not there, then I send a quick email, and then be able to talk to them later.” This accessibility reinforces teachers’ perceptions of being supported and heard.

Participants also described how supportive leadership contributes to a positive and unified school climate. Aurora noted how strong administrators can transform a school's climate:

When you have a strong administrator. It just changes the whole culture of your school. Not only the kids, but your teachers. People share their excitement more when they know they have support.

Mirabel echoed this sentiment by reflecting on a unifying cultural experience from the previous school year, when they for the first time got staff t-shirts for the entire district and they all wore them on Friday’s. This example highlights how visible and intentional leadership efforts can positively influence school culture, feelings of inclusivity, and overall staff morale.

While strong administrative support was widely identified as essential, participants also noted that the absence of such support can negatively impact rural educators' experiences.

Colette and Merida both described situations in which administrators were frequently unavailable, making their absence particularly noticeable. Colette explained, "He was always at the Capitol because he's got everybody able to run everything and do the reports for the state." Merida similarly described a lack of support early in her career, stating, "I will say I wish I had had more like either a mentor or just administration in my classroom in year one to give me more feedback."

Frequent administrative turnover was another challenge that disrupted school stability. Colette noted that in her 21 years being a teacher she has had 8 or more principals and superintendents. In contrast, Ariel shared that turnover ultimately contributed to her decision to remain at her school, explaining, "If our administrator had not left at the end of October, I was considering this to be my final year, because there was no consistency, and discipline was applied very unevenly." The absence of supportive leadership is one that can create potential turnover issues in rural schools, so the district's ability to recruit and retain these individuals is an important item for them to have.

These statements all show proof on how leadership matters greatly in rural school districts. The staff at rural schools typically rely heavily on the support from administration as it pertains to professional and emotional support, helping shape the experiences of the entire school and community. Supportive leadership is a stabilizing force in rural schools and they help foster trust, morale, and a shared purpose amongst the community.

Instructional Autonomy as a Contributor to Teacher Satisfaction

Instructional Autonomy as a Contributor to Teacher Satisfaction Instructional autonomy refers to the professional freedom teachers are granted to make decisions about how and what they teach, including selecting curricular materials, designing lessons, adapting instruction for student needs, and experimenting with new approaches. Autonomy gives teachers the ability to act as instructional experts, being able to change instruction strategies and adopting classroom approaches based on their teaching style and preferences.

When teachers are trusted to act as instructional experts, they report feeling more valued, empowered, and capable of meeting the diverse needs of their students. This is supported by Erss who stated that a teachers' ability to exercise autonomy over their curriculum can be a highly impactful factor in helping them feel valued and empowered to address students' individual needs (2017). Being given the trust and autonomy in the classroom is a sustaining force that can help overcome frequent items, such as additional preps, when it comes to teacher retention.

This connection was evident in the interviews, as several participants emphasized how curricular flexibility enhanced their instructional effectiveness. Ariel described how being able to use a familiar curriculum benefited both her and her students, stating, "I was allowed to use a curriculum I was familiar with and that way I can continue with something already new that I felt would be most beneficial for my students." Ariel's comments reflect how autonomy can reduce instructional stress and improve confidence, which is especially beneficial in content areas that require a high level of expertise, like math.

Belle similarly highlighted the importance of curricular freedom, and how it helps her align her instruction to her professional judgment. She stated, "I have a lot of freedom to do what I want in the classroom, we do have a district curriculum. But there is no expectation for me to

follow that.” This kind of autonomy helps affirm her professional agency, which helps with her overall enjoyment of her job.

Several teachers brought up that autonomy was rooted in administrative trust, allowing them the freedom to create and try new items in their classroom. Merida described the unique opportunities in her school as “I’ve gotten to try a lot of different things that probably wouldn’t be allowed in a larger school with a set curriculum.” Her comment underscores how in rural districts, despite some lack of resources, they might be able to offer creative ways to give teachers instructional autonomy.

Anna, Elsa, and Belle all expressed that they have the opportunity to write and design their own curriculum. Belle described how targeted professional learning contributed to this process, explaining that “The project was called Mid-step, I spent a week there and worked on curriculum development.” Elsa echoed the importance of trust and support in curriculum design, stating, “I write my own curriculum, I think just being supported and listened to and trusted that we know what we’re doing.” Lastly, Anna also reflected on being recognized as a content expert noting that “We wrote a curriculum like 2 years ago, I was like allowed to be the content area expert in that. So, I do think that’s important.” These examples not only reveal how these teachers are given jurisdiction over their instructional choices, but that also affirms their professional identity.

The interviews suggest that instructional autonomy serves as a meaningful contributor to teacher satisfaction in rural schools. Autonomy allows teachers to alter instruction on a case-by-case basis and respond flexibly to unique local needs, and express their expertise thus having

them more invested in their work. For many rural teachers, these conditions help offset other challenges such as heavy prep loads, limited resources, or compensation constraints.

Supportive Collegial Relationships

Supportive Collegial Relationships refers to the professional, collaborative, and interpersonal relationships that exist between staff members in a school setting. The relationships provide emotional and professional support, help foster a sense of belonging, and help reduce feelings of isolation. Research shows that through strong collegial relationships it can taper the emotional exhaustion associated with teaching and foster a greater sense of control over their professional roles (Kelly & Antonio, 2016).

Across the interviews, supportive relationships were brought up as being a vital part of a teacher's central enjoyment teaching in their current school. Gaston described the positive collegial environment at his school, stating, "Here, it's been pretty helpful having teachers that I can joke around with, talk about, and that's been helpful." His statement illustrates how a strong collegial culture can help teachers navigate the professional and emotional challenges they experience at work in the rural setting.

One advantage of rural schools is their typically smaller staff size in rural districts can facilitate closer professional relationships. Ariel regularly confides with four teachers in her building, representing about a 1/3 of the staff, which shows how a smaller scale of staff can strengthen those relationship ties. Belle similarly described a culture of mutual support within her school, stating, "I would say, as a staff we're pretty close, willing to help each other out. If somebody needs to leave for an hour to go we're happy to sub for each other." Mirabel echoed this experience, providing an example of how her school has a more informal system explaining, "I open the door between our classrooms, and she'll watch out for my kids and vice versa, or she

has a track meet, and I watch hers.” These everyday acts of cooperation help illustrate how teachers rely on one another to take care of their personal obligations, classroom responsibilities, and be available for extracurricular activities.

Participants also brought up the value of collaboration being a source of support. Gaston explained that “It’s typically my department meeting up and that has been a lifesaver for me.” Having these opportunities to collaborate regularly, especially in small schools where teachers might be the lone instructor of a course, can help teachers feel that support is necessary for their emotional and professional well-being.

Support in rural schools does extend beyond just teacher-teacher relationships, it in many instances is an “all hands-on deck” approach. Jasmine recalled how the custodian offered more encouragement early in her career, even helping her secure roles in her extracurricular positions. “The custodian got me the job as Pep Club and cheer coach because he said I was single and I needed to meet new coaches.” Her personal account does help show how in small rural schools that all members of the staff can have a positive influence and support for one another.

Elsa further emphasized the depth of staff support within her school community, particularly during times of personal hardship. She shared,

We’ve had some staff members that have had a great loss in their family, or cancer, or some. In one instance it was both, and had a baby in the middle, you know, and so people did come together, and, you know, collected money, or took out meals. So, I think that we do step up when we need to.

The mutual care that is provided in rural schools shows a characteristic that is consistent in rural schools, that staff members can act as if they are members of their peers’ extended family. The

colleagues are not only there to help their peers with professional matters but also to support them in practical and emotional ways.

All of these statements help to explain how the nature of supportive collegial relationships serve as a sustaining force in rural school districts. The relationships within the school help strengthen school culture, increase feelings of belonging, and overall increase teachers job satisfaction. For many of the participants not only are their colleagues' coworkers, but they are individuals who are essential to their personal and professional well-being.

Relational Embeddedness in Rural Schools

Relational Embeddedness in Rural Schools refers to the strength of social connections that teachers form within their school communities. The connections that are created can include those with their students, colleagues, families, and then the community at large. These ties can help create a strong sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and shared investment within the community. The major themes of personal family connections, community connections, personally knowing students and their families, and a sense of shared community responsibility came up in the interviews with participants.

Family Connections. Being close to family is an important factor for many rural educators when choosing the school district in which they teach (Azano et al., 2020). For Belle, she felt that her role as both a parent and an educator have become intertwined and she finds this to be personally and professionally fulfilling. Belle stated, "I feel like I am helping make our school better, so my own kids will have a better education. The most rewarding part is that I get to hopefully raise my kids better." Her statement highlights how teaching in her hometown allowed her to pursue both her personal and professional goals within the same environment.

Aurora also spoke about how raising her family in the same community where she works and had a positive long-term impact on her. She shared, “One of my own kids, I have 3 who've graduated now, and you know 2 of them are becoming our teachers.” Her experience demonstrates how relational embeddedness can go across generations, reinforcing the positive nature of rural teaching and life within the local community. Aurora also showed that within a strong community a family and their neighbors can grow into one and the same, as she wrote “School/community is one big family.” Showing how our teachers feel like they are embraced in the community is another major part of the positivity of relational embeddedness.

Community Connections. Beyond family ties, teachers described how the community connections they had fostered feelings of being accepted, trusted, and an alignment of values. Merida who initially came to her school district as an outsider helped explain how she felt welcomed stating “From being outside of the community, most of the community has been really welcoming.” Merida’s comments offer an insight that belonging in rural communities is normally gained through recognition and trust.

Teachers frequently described how respect and appreciation in the community helped increase their sense of purpose and belonging. Belle shared, “I think I'm pretty well respected in our community, we are treated pretty well because they want us to stay.” Jasmine similarly described how a strong sense of community-school relationships model good behaviors for students. She stated “We've taught them how you know how important the community is, we're constantly getting support and so this is a way for our kids to give back.” This shows the importance of school and community partnerships and how they can be mutually rewarding and sustaining.

Anna offered another perspective on community support, pointing to programs that directly address student needs. She described a program, Bright Futures, which coordinates clothing, food, and coat drives:

In general, the community supports the school quite well. I mean, there are a lot of involved people in the community. We have this organization called Bright Futures that does a lot to provide food, clothing and runs coat drives.

Such initiatives demonstrate how the relationships extend beyond just teachers, but to a broader sense the school, students, and community as a whole.

Knowing Students and Families. Participants described how having deep knowledge of students' families helps enhance their ability to connect and support their students. Elsa highlighted how communication in small-town communities often occurs more naturally due to close relationships among families. She explained, "I know your mama and your grandma... I got your mom and my cell phone right here; we can call right now if we need to." This familiarity allows teachers to quickly intervene and communicate with families regarding concerns, which is something that may not be as easy in larger districts.

Jasmine explained how her personal connections helped with a student that was going through a difficult family transition. She shared, "I know their parents, I could see the change in her during the last few weeks. I made adjustments." This ability to make instructional and relational adjustments based on personal knowledge of students' family circumstances was identified as a significant factor in supporting both teachers and students.

Shared Community Responsibility. Teachers also discussed how these relationships shape the sense of a shared community role in helping sustain their local schools. Aurora emphasized the importance of community in her town, describing it as a shared responsibility to help ensure that they retain teachers. Aurora explained that

Your same parents are doing very many lots of wearing lots of hats. So, you do have the support with the policies, because I think they want what's best for our kids, and they understand that if we don't support our teachers and we lose teachers, that's detrimental, and that we've got to do whatever we can to keep our school trying to grow and to draw new families in.

Aurora also discussed how her community functions as a bedroom community with a population of approximately 300 people. She explained that, in order to keep schools open and teachers employed, the community relies not only on shared responsibility but also heavily on the success of the local agricultural industry. As she noted, “Enrollments tend to drop not necessarily to the fault of districts, but just due to agricultural reasoning.” These economic and demographic challenges can create difficulties for small towns, with impacts that are often felt within schools.

Colette and Gaston both acknowledged the complexities that come with being in a small town. Teachers are often watched closely and local challenges, such as divorce, is something that can directly impact their students and the community. Colette stated “Divorces are probably the biggest difficult thing we actually handle with children.” Gaston similarly acknowledged that living and working in a small community can create a sense of being criticized, he added “The only time I usually get feedback is when someone's complaining” Despite these challenges, Gaston emphasized that the benefits of being close to family and friends continue to outweigh the negatives and remains a sustaining force. Gaston shared

But for me, the big thing that has made me really want to stay here it's the people I know, the multiple people that I could shoot a text to, and they'd be there for me in a heartbeat, or I'll get a random text once every couple of weeks just someone saying, hey, how are you doing? What's going on?

Ultimately, the relational embeddedness helps to strengthen the overall feelings of connectedness in rural education. Teachers are described as being seen, and valued, when they experience those personal attachments to the community. When teachers feel

connected, supported, and anchored by the community and the relationships that they develop they are more likely to commit to their long-term roles in their rural school district.

Building Strong Student–Teacher Relationships

Building Strong Student–Teacher Relationships refers to the supportive and meaningful connections that are formed with students through their daily interactions and mentorship. Positive student–teacher relationships have been shown to increase both student and teacher motivation (Li et al., 2022). In rural schools where you see smaller class sizes and overlapping community roles, these relationships often become very deep and enduring. Rather than serving as a factor that pushes teachers to leave the profession, strong relationships with students are more commonly cited as a reason teachers choose to remain in their positions (Arthur & Bradley, 2023).

In this study every teacher interviewed described student-teacher relationships as a primary reason why they remain in their current teaching roles. Colette specifically stated student-teacher relationships as a primary reason for remaining in the profession Colette stated, “I’ve stayed in this position because of a couple of kids each time. I know they wouldn’t have made it through if I had if I’d left.” Her statement demonstrates how seriously teachers take their responsibility and connections to their students.

For many teachers watching the students mature over time helps contribute to their sense of purpose. Belle reflected on that part of her job that she adores, saying “That’s a very, very cool thing to see to get to, to get to watch them grow and develop as a student and then as a person too.” Ariel emphasized how rural school settings facilitate deeper

connections as you can have the same students over years, noting, “You do build stronger relationships. And when I have a class for 2 or 3 years in a row, it makes a big difference in classroom management.”

Teachers also highlighted how small school sizes enhance the ability to know students on a more personal level. Merida stated how she enjoyed being able to recognize every student in her building adding “It's really nice being in a 6 through 12 school, because I see their faces. I know who they are, even if they're not in my class.” Elsa similarly noted that working in a smaller school allows meaningful relationships to develop with her students Elsa shared that her experience was that “I can build relationships with almost every kid, you can't do that when you have a thousand coming across your desk every day.”

The relationships extend well beyond the classroom. Jasmine described maintaining the relationships even after students graduating, explaining, “You build that relationship with not only your students, but past students. Most of my best friends are former students.” Aurora similarly reflected on the long-term impact of these relationships, noting that it was “It was the relationships. Not just the teaching, but the coaching interacting with those kids and then seeing what they're doing now in the future.” The connections that teachers made with students even during the extracurricular activities helped to further those connections that they made. Mirabel described her coaching responsibilities as a significant source of personal fulfillment, stating “Coaching attaches me to the community more than anything else. I know they will come to me if there's a disaster and they feel safe telling me.” Anna similarly emphasized that sponsoring band and choir activities strengthened her relationships with her students. Anna explained “Those kids especially, I feel like I have a really positive relationship with.” The connections

made both in and out of the classroom are ones that can really increase the overall morale of both students and teachers.

One of the most powerful statements regarding student–teacher relationships came from Gaston as he explained why he is a teacher, he stated

Interaction with the students. That's and obviously I love my subject matter and I love teaching. But it's seeing kids. You know that one moment of you know, maybe their day, their week, their month, or the year, where they just light up. And they're just having a really great day. Maybe they did something really good in a sporting event. Maybe they had a play, and it went fantastic. I love being there for those moments and celebrating them with them, and then on the flip side, you know, when they have those opposite days where it's really bad being there to be like. Hey, it's going to be okay, we're going to get through this. It may not look the same. Life might be different. It might be harder. That's why, you know, I do this.

Gaston's words capture the profound emotional reciprocity that characterizes student-teacher relationships in rural schools. Teachers not only celebrate the accomplishments of students, but also are there to support them during difficult times.

The various perspectives that were shared illustrate the importance of having strong student-teacher relationships in rural schools. Ultimately, with every teacher highlighting their students as a key reason for remaining in their school, these findings suggest that the close, personal relationships created in rural schools play a major role in teacher retention.

Professional Trust and Autonomy in Rural Contexts

Professional Trust and Autonomy in Rural Contexts refer to the degree in which teachers are empowered to make decisions without excessive oversight. In this study the purpose of professional trust and autonomy in rural contexts will be used to discuss the experiences of five teachers who have experience in both rural and non-rural settings. The five all have expressed overall how in the rural environment they have experienced a strong sense of trust and

autonomy. Specifically, the teachers found that in their rural teaching job they had great flexibility, reduced oversight, and stronger support.

Ariel discussed the collaborative nature of being in a rural district and that she had a more negative experience in the non-rural district. Ariel emphasized that the sense of unity is much greater stating, “I think it's much easier in a rural district. We kind of have to stick together because we are all facing some of the same challenges.” She also reflected on her experiences in a non-rural environment, noting, “It felt like I was targeted, and constantly monitored, but never given any positive feedback.”

Anna also described that she felt additional pressure and stress, after being micromanaged in the non-rural school. Anna explained, “I mean the biggest stressors were having to work with teams that were very micromanaging.” She elaborated further on the lack of autonomy, stating, “You don't get autonomy with how you discipline the classroom you must use their procedures.” These examples illustrate how strict some school structures can be in place and with scripted requirements it strips teacher’s sense of professionalism and makes them feel not trusted.

In contrast, teachers highlighted that smaller schools provide greater trust and instructional flexibility. Merida stated, “I've gotten to try a lot of different things that probably wouldn't be allowed in a larger school with a set curriculum.” Merida shows how rural contexts can provide the freedom for teachers to experiment with different practices to help cater to students' individual needs, which can be more challenging in a larger system with more rigid structures.

Some teachers pointed out that the culture of the rural school setting is one that is more appealing. Colette observed, “The things I like most is, the things seem to be quieter and simpler.” The simplicity of rural districts in this regard was not viewed in a negative context, but as being trusted and given the autonomy to make their own professional decisions.

Gaston not only expressed a desire to remain in rural education but also envisioned pursuing administrative leadership in an even smaller school district setting. He added, “I think I want to go more rural eventually. I love this school, and I don't see myself leaving anytime soon, but if I'm looking for the long term, that is the ultimate end goal.” Gaston additionally expressed that he wanted to lead a school of potentially smaller size reinforcing how his treatment in his current school has helped shape his future career goals.

Merida similarly expressed a preference for small rural schools, stating, “I like teaching rural communities. So, if I left this community it would be for a smaller school.” Her comment reflects how working in rural systems not only becomes a job but a profession that is rooted in autonomy, supportive relationships, and trust.

Collectively the teachers interviewed indicated that they are satisfied with their choice to work in rural settings compared to non-rural districts. The professional trust and autonomy are central to shaping teachers' satisfaction in rural schools. The strong preference for rural districts expressed by these teachers indicate that professional trust and autonomy are powerful contributors to rural teacher retention. When teachers feel respected, trusted, empowered, and supported they are more likely to remain in the roles and invest deeply into their school communities.

These findings show the overall feelings that teachers have regarding their rural education experience. The positives of these 10 teachers outweigh the negatives when looking at

the introductory questionnaire results and then data collected from the semi-structured interviews. This information provides a foundation for the discussion in Chapter Five, where implications for rural educators' long-term commitment to their jobs and implications for future research are discussed and explored.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Chapter 5 provides synthesis and interpretation of the information gathered from the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews that teachers participated in, as presented in Chapter 4. The findings from this qualitative study will help better understand, “What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings?” As a reminder the sub-questions for this study are as follows:

SQ1: What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural high school teachers’ continued commitment to their schools and communities?

SQ2: How do rural school districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?

SQ3: How does four-capital theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) help explain how rural teachers sustain commitment and professional fulfillment over time?

The results from the semi-structured interviews serve as the information discussed to help answer both SQ1 and SQ2. SQ1 focuses on each teacher’s individual lived rural experience, so the data will be pulled from the individual items that each participant listed or said during the interviews. SQ2 is designed around the intentional efforts that are put forth by the rural school districts themselves to gain their teachers' commitment, additionally using the interviews information to answer this research question. SQ3 uses the results from the questionnaire, as well as the interviews, to help answer the questions around the Four Capital Theory from Mason and Matas (2015), which provided the theoretical framework for this study.

Summary of Findings

Overall Research Question Results

Table 5.1 depicts a summary of the findings by research question, linking the findings to how they assist in answering each sub question and the overall research question.

Table 5.1. *Summary of Findings by Research Question*

Research Question	Themes From Chapter 4	Summary of Findings (What Teachers Said / Experienced)	How This Answers the RQ
RQ: What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings?	Meaningful Relationships (students, colleagues, community)	Teachers emphasized strong student relationships (“I can build relationships with all of those kids” – Elsa), collegial support (“helpful to have teachers I can joke around with, vent to” – Gaston), and community belonging (“Most of the community has been really welcoming” – Merida).	Commitment is driven by relational resources that provide purpose, emotional support, and belonging.
	Professional Support (autonomy, trust, leadership)	Teachers valued autonomy (“I get to try a lot of different things” – Merida), trust (“freedom to implement exactly what I want” – Belle), and supportive leadership (“You go, I’ll cover your class” – Jasmine).	Teachers stay because they feel trusted, supported, and professionally empowered.
	Rural Contextual Factors (home proximity, small class sizes)	Teachers described satisfaction with working near family (“I like living close to family” – Anna), teaching in hometowns (Elsa), and benefiting from small class sizes allowing personalization.	Contextual conditions reinforce loyalty and long-term fit with rural teaching.
	Balancing Challenges and Supports	Teachers acknowledged high preps, role compression, and blurred boundaries, but reported that “sustaining forces outweigh the negative items.”	Teachers persist because relational and professional benefits compensate for structural strain.
SQ1: What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural teachers’ continued commitment?	Student–Teacher Relationships	Strong relationships were universally named as primary reasons for staying. (“Some of my former students are now some of my best friends” – Jasmine)	Student-centered purpose fuels long-term commitment and resilience.
	Supportive Collegial Relationships	Teachers relied on colleagues for emotional and professional support. (“We have to stick together” – Gaston)	Provides daily stability, reduces isolation, strengthens belonging.
	Community Embeddedness	Teachers felt known, valued, appreciated by the community.	Reinforces personal and professional identity within the school.
	Autonomy & Trust	Teachers valued professional freedom and lack of micromanagement. (“Things seem quieter and simpler” – Colette)	Autonomy increases job satisfaction and

Research Question	Themes From Chapter 4	Summary of Findings (What Teachers Said / Experienced)	How This Answers the RQ
			encourages long-term tenure.
	Supportive Leadership	Leaders listened, checked in, protected time, and supported teachers during crisis moments. (Mirabel received birthday card; Jasmine’s admin covered class)	Leadership responsiveness creates emotional safety and reinforces organizational support.
	Proximity to Home & Small Class Sizes	Teachers stay because rural work connects with personal life and allows meaningful student relationships.	Contextual advantages reinforce satisfaction and ease of teaching.
SQ2: How do rural districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?	Stability & School Culture	Rural schools offer a calmer, less bureaucratic environment. (“Things seem quieter and simpler” – Colette) Leaders check in, respond to teacher needs, and foster a positive culture.	A stable, caring school culture supports teacher morale and retention.
	Strong Collegial Networks	Collaboration arises organically; teachers share duties, cover classes, and support each other. (“Peers are always willing to bounce ideas” – Merida)	Districts cultivate supportive environments by enabling organic collaboration rather than mandated teaming.
	Policy Flexibility	Flexibility with curriculum, discipline, scheduling, emergency departures, role assignments. (Merida taught English, social studies, band; principals drive buses when needed)	Flexible policies reduce stress, empower professional judgment, and adapt to rural staffing realities.
SQ3: How does Four-Capital Theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) explain how teachers sustain commitment over time?	Social Capital as the Core Sustaining Force	Teachers repeatedly cited relationships with students, colleagues, leadership, and community as sources of strength, especially during burnout.	High social capital compensates for emotional strain and keeps teachers committed.
	Human Capital Helps Teachers Manage Strain	Teachers overwhelmingly felt capable. (“I make it work.” – Aurora) They gained opportunities for growth and access to needed resources.	Human capital supports persistence by reinforcing teachers’ sense of competence and purpose.
	Structural Capital Offers Autonomy but Also Creates Strains	Teachers valued structural autonomy and small class sizes but struggled with multiple preps, role compression, and limited resources.	Structural capital both sustains (autonomy) and challenges (workload), demonstrating mixed but influential effects.
	Positive Psychological Capital Is Vulnerable but Replenished by Other Capitals	Teachers struggled with work–home balance but found motivation through students and colleagues. (“That’s why I do this.” – Gaston)	Positive psychological capital is strengthened by social, human, and structural capital, illustrating the interdependence described in four-capital theory.

RQ: What do rural secondary teachers attribute to their sustained and long-term commitment to teaching in rural settings?

The findings of this study revealed that rural teachers' commitment is driven primarily by relational, professional, and contextual factors, helping to illuminate their shared experiences as rural educators. Teachers in this study repeatedly emphasized that their deep and meaningful relationships, professional support, and sense of belonging contributed significantly to their commitment to their current roles.

The meaningful relationships teachers described included those with leadership, colleagues, students, and the community as a whole. Student relationships, in particular, provided teachers with a sense of purpose and motivation to do their jobs. The ability to make a difference in students' lives was consistently discussed by participants and emerged as a strength tied to social capital. These findings align with existing research; Hurst and Brantlinger (2022) found that positive student-teacher relationships were critical to retaining teachers.

Additionally, this research showed that not only student relationships but also relationships with staff, leadership, and the broader rural community have a strong impact on teacher retention. Positive relational capacity proved especially impactful, and it appears that school districts that embrace open, supportive relationships are more successful than those with restrictive environments. This aligns with research by Kwok and Hardy (2019), who found that teachers are more likely to follow directions from individuals they trust and that school boards fostering collaborative relationships with staff and communities are more likely to promote retention.

Another key factor appreciated by teachers was the professional autonomy and trust they experienced in their rural districts. Many teachers shared that the support they received from leadership and the overall positive school culture strengthened their commitment. Having autonomy and the trust that accompanies it enables teachers to make informed judgments and professional decisions when needed. This partially aligns with Cheng et al. (2019), who argued that districts should maintain a blend of functional, structural, and cultural autonomy. Leadership teams that naturally allow for such autonomy help validate and expand professionalism within their staff, thus building teacher capacity. This finding also reflects what Keddle (2015) identified in her research: that autonomy is highly valuable to school districts.

Contextual factors, such as smaller class sizes and proximity to home, also influenced teachers' decisions to remain in their current rural schools. Smaller class sizes were viewed as a benefit of working in rural districts, as they not only make workloads more manageable but also allow for more personal student-teacher relationships, findings consistent with Price and Terry (2008). Additionally, being closer to home helped many teachers strengthen their community ties and invest more deeply in the school's future success. These personal connections align with findings presented by Seeling and McCabe (2021).

Teachers' ability to balance sustaining forces with structural challenges also provides insights into the main research question. Although barriers such as higher preparation loads, role compression, limited resources, and blurred boundaries between work and home certainly exist, the sustaining forces ultimately outweighed these negative factors for the teachers in this study. The power of relationships, trust and autonomy, and community support helped mitigate the structural strains.

To further examine the data from this study, the sub-questions provide additional layers of analysis. SQ1 explores the specific resources that sustain teacher commitment. SQ2 examines what rural districts themselves do to create supportive environments. SQ3 then applies Four-Capital Theory to explain how these forces interacted within the context of this study.

SQ1: What personal, relational, and organizational resources support rural high school teachers' continued commitment to their schools and communities?

Findings from this study show that teachers' long-term commitment is grounded primarily in relational resources, professional trust and autonomy, supportive leadership, and contextual conditions such as proximity to home and small class sizes. However, when examined alongside the structural tensions identified in participants' interviews, compensation constraints, work home boundary challenges, and instructional load strain, it becomes clear that the sustaining forces operate as counterweights to the pressures that commonly threaten teacher retention in rural settings. These tensions align with the literature we have reviewed and it shows that these are common items in rural education (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). This dynamic aligns with prior research showing that although rural teachers face systematic challenges, strong relationships and professional autonomy often keep them in the profession (Wadell, 2010; Zhang & Zeller, 2016).

Every participant described meaningful relationships with students as foundational to their desire to stay. Anna referenced her musical theater students, Elsa emphasized knowing "all of those kids," and Jasmine maintained friendships with former students well into adulthood. These relational elements echoed the sustaining force identified as *Building Strong Student-Teacher Relationships*. These findings align with research showing that strong student relationships enhance motivation, teaching fulfillment, and retention (Spilt et al., 2011). Prior

research affirms this finding: positive relationships with students not only anchor teacher motivation (Perryman & Calvert, 2020) but also improve teaching practice itself (Li et al., 2022). Prior literature also suggests that rural contexts, with their smaller class sizes and multiyear student assignments, naturally foster more personalized interaction, strengthening teachers' emotional investment (Vaughn et al., 2021). These relational benefits help counter the stress associated with high school workloads and the emotional exhaustion reported in rural districts.

Teachers expressed that collegial bonds served as a major source of emotional and practical support. Gaston described colleagues as people he could "joke around with and vent to," while Jasmine noted that support extended beyond the teaching staff. These findings align with the sustaining force *Supportive Collegial Relationships*, which also appeared in seven interview references. Prior scholarship reinforces this: collegial support lowers attrition and builds professional resilience (Wiens et al., 2019).

By comparison, the structural tension *Instructional Load and Capacity Strain* noted when teachers discussed multiple preps, role comprehension, and shortage of specialized staff it could exacerbate burnout (Carrette-Marin, 2024). Yet participants reported that collegial networks eased this pressure. Elsa explained that the staff "step up and assist however they can," demonstrating how collaborative cultures soften the burden of heavy instructional loads. In this study, collegiality emerged as a protective force, helping teachers maintain resilience during periods of high workload or personal stress.

Teachers reported strong identification with and support from the communities in which they worked. They described feeling welcomed, recognized, and valued by families and local stakeholders. These findings mirror research showing that rural communities maintain close knit structures in which schools play a central social role (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Community

embeddedness helps counteract structural tensions particularly lower salaries and limited resources (Showalter et al., 2023). In this study, participants indicated that belonging to the community reinforces their commitment, even when they acknowledge that they could earn more elsewhere or face fewer demands in another setting.

Teachers repeatedly mentioned that professional autonomy was a defining benefit of rural teaching and a major contributor to their decision to stay. These findings align with research showing that autonomy improves job satisfaction and retention (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021). They described the freedom to choose curriculum, adjust instructional pacing, and design lessons creatively. Additional research similarly shows that allowing teachers to tailor culturally relevant instruction to student needs promotes job satisfaction (Vaughn & Soul, 2013). In districts where workload demands are high, autonomy also helps teachers manage expectations and build instructional confidence. Participants described autonomy as a form of trust that affirmed their professional identity and encouraged long-term commitment.

Administrators played a pivotal role in supporting teacher commitment. Administrators who listened, offered emotional and practical support, and intervened during stressful periods were described as central to teacher satisfaction. Research highlights that strong administrative relationships reduce stress and foster positive work culture in rural districts (Tran & Dou, 2019). These findings additionally align with research that states, leadership responsiveness strongly predicts retention (Shuls & Flores, 2020). The leaders described in the study provided flexibility and relational support that buffered against structural tensions such as workload strain and work home imbalance. The participants in this study noted that supportive leadership made their daily experience more manageable, promoting sustained commitment.

Many participants valued being close to family and residing in the communities where they worked. This proximity provided personal stability and contributed to their investment in the district's long-term success. This aligns with findings from Edwards et al., (2024) that stated teachers that are teaching in close proximity to their home towns are more likely to remain in their current school than those teaching far away. Research additionally supports that rural educators often remain in districts where they have personal and familial ties, as such connections increase loyalty and reduce turnover (Barley, 2009). Participants also highlighted the benefits of small class sizes, which allowed for individualized instruction, and additionally enhanced teacher-student relationships. These statements also aligned with research that showed improved retention rates and instructional quality when these two items are fostered (Isenberg 2010, Wright et al., 2019). Proximity to home and class sizes both were cited as meaningful contributors to teacher satisfaction.

SQ2: How do rural school districts cultivate conditions that support and strengthen teacher commitment and longevity?

Findings for SQ2 reveal that rural districts foster commitment through three primary mechanisms: cultivating stable school culture, fostering strong collegial networks, and maintaining flexible organizational policies. These practices help offset salary disparities, workload challenges, and limited resources documented in the literature.

Teachers consistently describe their schools as stable, close-knit, and relationally grounded. Participants reported that administrators checked in frequently, demonstrated empathy, and cultivated a sense of collective responsibility. This stability was maintained by leaders who regularly checked on teachers, offered assistance, and created an environment of psychological safety. Prior research supports this finding, noting that a positive school culture

contributes significantly to teacher well-being and retention (Williams et al., 2022). Additionally, Research supports that rural school culture is strengthened by shared community values and frequent interpersonal interactions (Seeling & McCabe, 2021), these items align with this study's findings. Given the persistent challenges rural educators face, including lower pay compared to non-rural districts (Showater et al., 2023), a stable and positive school culture provides an essential buffer that reinforces long-term commitment.

Teachers highlighted an environment of organic collaboration where colleagues voluntarily supported each other. Participants described covering classes for peers, sharing instructional duties, and providing emotional support. Gaston's comment "We have to stick together" illustrates how collegial networks arise from shared challenges including limited staff multi-role expectations and high prep loads. This aligns with Preston and Barnes (2017), who found that strong professional cultures in rural schools often emerge organically from necessity, given limited staffing and resources. Such collegial support helps rural teachers navigate instructional load demands, which Barrow and Burchett (2000) identified as a critical driver of burnout and attrition.

Teachers appreciated the flexibility embedded in their districts policies, including adjustable schedules, curricular freedom, and fluid role assignments. Research has shown that having autonomy and the ability to influence their jobs, teacher satisfaction and retention will improve (Nguyen et al., 2026; Jenkins 2020). Leaders stepping in to drive buses or cover classes illustrate a culture of shared responsibility. This flexibility reflects rural research suggesting that autonomy and adaptive policies are crucial for supporting teachers who face demanding workloads or blurred work-home boundaries (Vaughn & Saul, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2018). In

the study, participants described flexibility as a structural support that made it easier to manage stress, pursue balance, and remain in their positions despite external pressures.

SQ3: How does four-capital theory (human, social, structural, and positive-psychological capital) help explain how rural teachers sustain commitment and professional fulfillment over time?

Mason and Matas's (2015) Four Capital Theory provides a powerful lens for understanding why rural teachers remain committed to their roles despite persistent challenges. As Vaidya and Hanna (2023) note, the four capitals represent "factors that impact a teacher's work and personal life, both within and outside the school" (p.21). This shows how this framework is relevant for this study which focuses on rural settings where personal and professional life overlap regularly. Each individual capital plays a distinct role; however, it is the interaction of these capitals that ultimately enables teachers to persist. When integrated with interview data and questionnaire results, the four capital model helps explain how teachers endure structural tensions while still finding meaning and satisfaction in their work.

Across all capitals, social capital emerged as the strongest and most influential form consistent with Mason and Matas's (2015) themes of leadership quality, school culture and informal support networks. Social capital received the highest mean score in the questionnaire (4.23) And showed the lowest variability, confirming its stabilizing role. These findings align with Pretty and Ward's (2001) argument that strong relationships foster trust and reduce negative workplace behaviors. Additionally, it supports Vaidya and Hanna's (2023) assertion that social capital grows through sustained relational ties within the school and community.

Teachers described how administrators, colleagues, students, and community members created a relational safety net that helped offset any emotional strain. Jasmine's statement that

her administrator immediately offered class coverage during a crisis exemplifies what Mason and Matas referred to as “The presence and quality of leadership.” Teachers' comments also confirm Lochner et al. 's (1999) claim that community level interactions strengthen local social capital, which is vital in rural districts where teachers often live among their students' families.

Importantly, social capital in the study functioned as a counterweight to structural tensions. These tensions included low salary, Work home imbalance, and role compression. Teachers did acknowledge these challenges but emphasize that the relationships “kept them going,” which helped reveal how social capital can help replenish positive psychological capital. This reveals that social capital is the primary driver amongst the four capitals for teacher retention in rural districts.

Human capital includes teachers’ skills, training, and access to ongoing professional development (Mason & Matas, 2015). The study’s results revealed that teachers generally felt well prepared incapable as the questionnaire results revealed a mean of 3.90. This echoes Hendricks’ (2002) argument that high-quality teachers function as productive assets. Goldin's (2024) definition of human capital as an investment that increases productivity is reflected in how rural teachers described adapting to multi prep schedules, learning new content areas, and continually refining their instructional practices.

Yet, interviews revealed notable strain, particularly regarding workload and role complexity. Anna has to manage three different levels of ELA And Aurora found difficulty as being the only math teacher, this helps illustrate how structural demands test the limits of human capital. However, teachers also cited professional development opportunities and resource access as reinforcing their competence. Mirabel noted that she “Never had to pay out-of-pocket,” which reflects the presence of structural capital that supports human capital. Likewise, other teachers

mentioned opportunities for instructional experimentation and growth which aligns with Abraham and Mallatt's (2022) findings that teacher qualifications and experiences shape student outcomes. Thus, human capital in rural contexts is both strengthened by teachers' adaptability and strained by structural limitations, requiring complementary support from social structural capitals.

Structural capital refers to the organizational processes, resources, and policies that enable teachers to perform effectively (Hejazi et al., 2016; Malhotra, 2003). In the study, teachers consistently praised the autonomy and flexibility afforded by their rural districts. The interpretation of the questionnaire findings showed an overall strong structural capital rating with a mean of 3.95, particularly in decision making autonomy with the mean of 4.30. These results align with Mason and Matas's (2015) framework which identifies employment conditions, departmental policies, and role complexity as components of structural capital that shape retention.

However structural capital also has its negative points. While teachers valued freedom from micromanagement, curricular autonomy, and flexible administrative practices, they also grappled with heavy workload, limited staffing, and resource shortages. Teachers describing six preps or multiple content roles reflect the structural tension around role complex complexity and limited planning time. These findings parallel Pancsofar and Petroff's (2013) Argument that resource and equities weaken teachers' confidence and Foster's (2011) discussion of how budget constraints limit world districts capacity to offer robust structural supports.

Nevertheless, autonomy and flexibility served as structural factors that allowed teachers to tailor instruction, adjust pacing, and exercise professional judgment mitigating the burden of complex or overloaded roles. This mirrors Aramburu and Sáenz's (2011) assertion that

structural resources shape innovation and problem-solving capacity. This additionally reinforces the notion that structural capital sustains teachers when paired with strong social and human capital.

Positive psychological capital which includes a teacher's levels of hope, confidence, optimism, and resilience (Sweetman et al., 2011), received the lowest mean from the questionnaire at 3.58 and demonstrated the highest variability. Teachers described emotional fatigue, blurred work home boundaries, and inconsistent district level support, aligning with Mason and Matas's (2015) emphasis on psychological factors as key to retention.

Despite these negatives, psychological capital was consistently replenished through social. This echoes Toor and Ofori's (2010) claim that organizations can strengthen psychological capital by fostering supportive environments. Teachers repeatedly emphasized student growth, multiyear relationships, and supportive colleagues as sources of motivation and hope. Teachers shared their excitement for watching student growth as well as multiyear relationship relationships which exemplifies the reciprocal interplay between social and psychological capitals.

These patterns align with Mason and Matas's (2015) mapping of attrition and retention themes across all four capitals and support Vaidya and Hannah's (2023) conclusion that the capitals together influence teachers' decisions to stay or leave. In the study teachers sustained long-term commitment because of the collective strength of social, human, and structural capital which outweighs the systematic pressures that threatened psychological well-being.

Implications

Implications for Rural School District Leaders

The study's findings showed there are several actions that rural school district leaders can take to help ensure teachers become committed to long-term careers. Two main areas were identified: ensuring authentic administration support is fostered in rural schools and allowing teacher autonomy with curriculum and voice with scheduling. These two areas were discussed consistently across the questionnaire and interviews, keeping them present in rural districts may help lower turnover rates.

Ensuring Authentic Administration Support

The most prominent sustaining force mentioned by participants in the interviews was *Supportive Leaderships in Rural Schools*. It was clear that teachers perceived supportive administrators having a positive impact on their overall job satisfaction. Administrator support has been identified as one of the strongest indicators of teacher satisfaction, this aligns with the findings of Tickle et al. (2011) who found a positive correlation with perceived administrator support and retention rates.

To ensure that teacher satisfaction remains high, administrators in rural districts should continue to build a positive culture of relational support by remaining visible and available to staff, as this is what teachers want more of according to Tosun and Bostancı (2024). This is especially important for new teachers, as effective administrative support is essential for strong mentorship programs (Callahan, 2016).

Additionally, if the administration has the ability to modify scheduling, they should work to limit the number of preparations for educators. This can be beneficial for new hires who are

still developing foundational teaching skills such as lesson planning, establishing classroom routines, and adjusting to the physical and emotional demands of teaching (Liston et al., 2006).

Finally, administrators who prioritize building and maintaining trust through consistent leadership practices are more likely to earn staff respect and help ensure that teachers feel motivated to remain for the long-term in their districts (Handford & Leithwood, 2013).

Teacher Autonomy and Voice with Scheduling

Teachers who were given the ability to implement the curriculum of their choosing and designed lessons they found most impactful expressed appreciation for this autonomy. Participants described autonomy not only as instructional flexibility, but as an indicator of trust and respect from leadership, which strengthened their commitment to their schools and communities. The need for curricular autonomy can be beneficial for adjusting lessons to student needs, aligning with Chapman's (2020) findings in which teachers integrated farming techniques to better engage rural students. Even in the presence of structural challenges such as limited planning time or multiple preps, this sense of autonomy contributed to teachers' willingness to remain in their positions. To support the retention of high-quality teachers, rural district leaders should allow teachers flexibility to adapt instruction and curriculum as needed. Teacher influence in these decisions have been shown to increase job satisfaction (Nguyen et al., 2026). Providing teachers with opportunities to understand and contribute to decision-making processes, such as scheduling or school wide procedures, it can further enhance perceptions of autonomy through increased transparency and shared ownership.

Along with curricular autonomy, teachers should have the opportunity to voice their preferences for the content they teach. Allowing teachers to express their interest in teaching multiple classes or specializing in one content can help teachers feel appreciated and trusted.

Encouraging teacher agency within their curriculum and classes can allow teachers to feel more empowered and put more of their time and energy into their work while increasing a sense of job satisfaction (Jenkins, 2020). Participants also distinguished between authentic collaboration, which emerged organically through trusted relationships, and mandated collaboration, suggesting that autonomy is most effective when paired with meaningful collaborative structures. In rural settings, these collaborative practices often extended beyond formal structures, reflecting the close-knit nature of school communities and further reinforcing teachers' sense of belonging. Research has demonstrated that collaborative cultures built upon strong relationships among colleagues can have positive impacts on student performance (Hargreaves, 2021). Thus, leaders who create structures that promote teacher voice and collaboration contribute positively to both teacher satisfaction and district goals. Together, autonomy and relational support functioned as interconnected factors, where professional independence was strengthened by the presence of strong interpersonal relationships within the school and community.

Implications for Educational Policy

The study's findings demonstrated several policy changes rural districts can implement to help ensure long-term teacher commitment. Two major areas include developing incentives that mitigate strain and establishing scheduling policies that protect planning time and out of class duties. Policies that address these issues demonstrate that districts value teachers as individuals and support their ability to manage workload.

Incentives to Mitigate Stress

Teachers commonly expressed that they had to make sacrifices to work in rural districts. Some described long commutes due to a lack of adequate housing, while others mentioned

inadequate funding tied to lower tax revenues or state budget cuts. Teachers also reported feeling pressured to take on additional roles, increasing strain on work–life balance.

To help mitigate stress, rural districts should seek ways to use existing community resources to meet teachers' needs. Sustaining forces such as a community embeddedness and strong relationships with families may offer opportunities for partnership. Private donations, subsidized housing, or community supported funding efforts could help address housing and resource shortages. Collins et al. (2008) support such approaches, noting that subsidized housing or reduced rent programs can benefit rural schools.

Additionally, schools requiring extra support such as after school programs could offer small stipends, within their budgets, to compensate teachers for additional responsibilities. Although some teachers may willingly step into these roles, offering incentives can help offset the stress associated with duties that extend beyond contractual hours. Berman & DeFeo (2024) support this claim, stating that less desirable situations that cannot be changed in a district, having adequate compensation could alleviate negative perceptions.

Protection of Plan Time and Out of Class Duties

Teachers need both individual and collaborative planning time to be successful (Merritt, 2016). Lack of planning time was a commonly mentioned negative factor in the study, as it made balancing professional and personal life more challenging. The findings align with O'Connor (2005), who found that increased planning time was among the top needs expressed by teachers. Implementing policies that protect teachers planning time is essential.

Additionally, stakeholders should consider policies ensuring that teachers volunteer for additional roles that reduce their free time, rather than being automatically assigned such duties. Some districts have reduced the number of hours teachers are expected to work, resulting in increased productivity (Bubb & Earley, 2004). Lastly, rural districts may benefit from positive-psychological capital programs, such as conflict management or stress reduction training, to help teachers cope with responsibilities that extend beyond school hours (Marmol, 2019).

Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

The study's findings identified two areas for improvement in teacher preparation programs: (1) developing coursework that addresses rural contexts and multisubject teaching, and (2) strengthening pipelines to rural mentoring and leadership development.

Rural Context and Multisubject Teacher Courses

A major challenge that rural schools face is that many educators view them as potential “problem areas” (Medeiros & Kane, 2024). To counter these stigmas and emphasize the advantages of rural teaching, preparation programs should incorporate coursework and field experiences that focus on rural education. Azano and Stewart (2016) found that preservice teachers desired more rural placements, suggesting that practical exposure helps reduce misconceptions and prepare teachers for rural environments.

Rural school districts often demand that their teachers teach multiple subject areas. Teachers in this study frequently described managing numerous "prep," with one teacher noting she taught six different courses. While this level of responsibility may not be necessary for student teachers, exposing them to multiple content areas and varied instructional planning during preparation could better equip them for the realities of rural teaching. Mead (1927)

argued that high school teachers should be prepared to teach more than one subject, a principle that remains still relevant today.

Teacher and Leadership Mentoring Resources and Connections

Teacher preparation programs should also ensure that rural educators and leaders have access to continued education. Distance learning programs can help support and develop the learning communities in rural parts of the United States (Glomb et al, 2009). Strengthening mentorship pipelines can sustain professional growth for both teachers and administrators, addressing trends in rural teacher attrition. Superintendents have emphasized that having network connections for leaders is necessary to help influence necessary change in the schools (Zuckermann, 2020). When teachers and leaders feel adequately supported, they are more likely to remain committed to their roles, as Luesse (2022) notes.

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to literature on Four Capital Theory by Mason & Matas (2015). The findings support that having the four capitals present in rural schools, teachers are more likely to view their schools positively and remain in their roles longer. Social capital stood out as particularly influential with a mean of a 4.23 from the introductory questionnaire and strong presence in the interviews. These findings support what was stated by Baker-Doyle (2010) that a teacher's perception of their social network in their workplace can be a determining factor in their long-term commitment at that school.

The biggest opportunity for rural schools lies in enhancing positive psychological capital to prevent burnout. Teacher perceptions of district support in this area were the lowest in the questionnaire (3.58) and were closely linked to the structural tension of work–home boundary challenges. If districts continue emphasizing social capital while implementing meaningful

policies that support balance and well-being, teacher commitment may be strengthened. Mvana (2015) similarly found that investing in teachers' psychological capital contributes to a more satisfied workforce.

Recommendations for Future Research

Larger Sample Size

In order to be able to give a more valid display of the rural educator's experience, having a larger sample size would be a way to increase the generalization of this study. Gaining more than 10 teachers total would be the first steps in helping with this. Secondly, since the rural school districts selected are only represented in the Midwest, having an ability to get into more school districts in the United States could also help with the validation of the data that has been discussed in this study. By having a larger sample size, it would help validate the findings and broaden understanding of the rural educator experience.

Post Interview Questionnaire and Mixed Methods

After analyzing the questionnaire data in pairing it with the interview transcripts, it became clear that some educators might have responded differently to the original capital theory questions. During the interviews, several teachers needed additional clarification about the four capitals, and once during the interviews, several teachers needed additional clarification about the four capitals, and once these explanations were provided, they were better able to answer the questions. Administering an additional quantitative questionnaire after the interview interviews may have revealed new findings or validated the original response responses. Incorporating follow up quantitative measures could also have strengthened the studies needing to be changed into a mixed methods design, and this would have allowed for further analysis from that empirical perspective.

A Broader and More Diverse Populations

Nine out of ten participants of this study were white females with the other being a white male. Although females statistically dominate in the educational workforce (Ingersoll et al., 2021), having the male perspective represented more in future studies would be beneficial to expand the literature base. Additionally, to help ensure that representation of all populations in a community are represented, finding minority populations and including their voice in the study would help expand the perspectives to a more diverse group that is represented within many rural communities.

Limitations

Self-Reported Data

The data collected for the study relied on teachers' willingness to answer questions honestly and to recall pertinent examples from their experiences. At times, as discussed previously, some participants required additional explanations or clarifications during the interviews, which may have affected the accuracy of certain responses particularly those related to the introductory questionnaire. Although teachers were informed that their answers remained confidential, it is possible that some withheld information out of concern for how their school or community might be perceived. Additionally, teachers were offered to interview formats a single interview or two separate interviews. Those who chose the two interview options may have had more time to reflect on their responses, potentially allowing them to revise or clarify their statements during the second session.

Rural Context Differences

The term rural is often used broadly to describe areas with fewer than 5000 residents, yet rural communities differ widely in their characteristics and needs. Some districts may struggle

with transportation challenges such as busing, others space limited budgets, and many encounter difficulties accessing adequate instructional resources (Boix-Tomás et al., 2015). Because rural areas are not uniform and neither are the individuals who live in work with them, teachers' experiences and interpretations can vary considerably. What one educator views as a strength, such as having curricular autonomy, another may interpret as lack of resources or the absence of a district adopted curriculum. Given the substantial differences among rule contexts, it is essential for researchers and practitioners to gather detailed, community specific information to accurately assess local conditions.

Conclusions

In reviewing the findings of this study, it is clear that there are several interconnected reasons why secondary teachers remain committed long-term to the roles in rural schools. When viewed through the lens of the four capitals, social capital emerged as the most influential factor. Supportive relationships with student students, colleagues' administrators, and the broader community fostered a strong sense of belonging and motivation among participants. Teachers also described feeling that their human capital was affirmed when they were trusted as professionals and provided with the resources they needed to succeed. Additionally, the policies and flexibility present in many rural schools, particularly the freedom to teach content in ways teachers perceive as most effective, helped reinforce trust between educators and their districts. This autonomy further strengthened teachers' commitment, as the ability to make meaningful instructional decisions reflected professional trust and served as a source of intrinsic motivation. When paired with strong relational support, autonomy functioned as a critical factor in sustaining long-term retention among rural educators.

Although teachers acknowledge challenges related to psychological capital, they also emphasize that the strength of the other capitals often outweigh the negative aspects of their work.

For rural schools facing issues with attrition, it is important to examine district policies and the expectations placed on leadership teams. Teachers who experienced supportive and genuinely caring administrators and colleagues are far more likely to remain than those who do not. The trust afforded to teachers in many rural school districts represents a distinctive factor that, if intentionally sustained and expanded, may contribute to improved long-term teacher retention. Rural educators who feel connected, empowered, and understood by stakeholders across the community are significantly more likely to stay in the roles over the long-term.

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Appendix A - Questionnaire

2/3/25, 8:41 PM

Why Do Rural Educators Remain in the Profession Survey

Why Do Rural Educators Remain in the Profession Survey

* Indicates required question

1. Please read over the informed consent listed below please select either "yes" or "no" to proceed with the survey. To access the full informed consent document please click [here](#). *

Informed Consent Statement

Title of Study:

Why do Rural High School Teachers Remain in the Profession?

Introduction: The Department of Education at Kansas State University values the ethical protection of all human subjects participating in research. This document provides essential information to help you make an informed decision about participating in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to decline or withdraw your consent at any time, without consequences to your grade or academic standing. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your decision will be respected, without penalty. **Purpose of the Study:** This study explores why rural high school teachers choose to remain in the profession, examining four different categories of capital as potential influencing factors. By analyzing participants' experiences, this research aims to provide insights into how these frameworks shape teacher retention in education.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be involved in the following activities:

Submit an introductory survey which will be linked to an email sent to rural school districts in Kansas.

Completing two semi-structured interviews* during the study (approximately 30 minutes each).

Please note that not all participants will be invited to take part in the interviews. Those who complete both interviews will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card.

All data is intended to be collected during the academic semester, and your participation will take place during the spring semester of 2025.

Risks:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Some prompts or discussions may lead to emotional reflection on your personal experiences with teaching and your opinions on why teachers have remained in or left their rural jobs. You may choose to pause or withdraw from participation at any time if you feel discomfort. Support resources will be available to you if needed.

Benefits:

Additionally, your participation may:

Enhance your understanding of why teachers remain in the field of education.

Contribute to the development of more effective teacher retention programs.

Advance research on teacher retention in rural school districts.

Participant Confidentiality:

Your privacy will be respected throughout this study.

All data, including survey data and interview transcripts, will be anonymized by assigning each participant a unique code.

Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the dissertation committee.

Data will be securely stored on password-protected devices and deleted after one year.

The study's final report or publication will not include your name or any identifying information.

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes, I agree to the terms and conditions of this study.

☐ No, I do not agree with the terms and conditions of this study.

Section 1: Contact Information and Introduction

Please fill out your contact information and then a snapshot of your career as a teacher.

2. Your first and last name *

3. Your preferred email. *

4. Which gender do you identify with? *

5. What school district do you currently teach in? *

6. What is your current school that you teach at? *

7. How many years of experience do you have as a teacher? *

8. How long have you been in your current teaching role? *

9. What subject(s) do you teach? *

10. What grade level(s) do you teach? *

Human Capital and Education

Please respond to the following statements centered around human capital and education.
Please select the option that best describes you (Scale: Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

11. Human Capital and Education *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel adequately trained for the tasks required in my role.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel my workload is manageable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My workplace supports opportunities for my professional growth and development.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I believe my school district offers a competitive salary compared to similar districts.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Social Capital and Education

Please answer the following questions regarding social capital and education.

12. Social Capital and Education *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My values align with the values of the school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If I were a parent, I would be satisfied with the education provided at my school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If needed, my immediate superior would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
If needed, my co-workers would be willing to listen to my work-related concerns.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Structural Capital and Education

Please answer the following questions regarding structural capital and education.

13. Structural Capital and Education *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have the ability to influence decisions that affect my work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel I have the necessary tools and resources to be successful in my job.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My school has the necessary facilities and technology to support student learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The policies and procedures at my school are appropriate to support effective learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Positive Psychological Capital and Education

Please answer the following questions regarding positive physiological capital and education.

14. Positive Psychological Capital and Education *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My work responsibilities influence the balance between my professional and personal life.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My school is concerned with the health and wellbeing of its staff.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I plan to continue teaching until I am eligible to retire.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel motivated to perform my work duties.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Semi-Structured Interview(s) Interest

Please answer the question below regarding your interest in participating in the two 30 minute semi-structured interviews.

15. Are you interested in participating in the interviews for the purpose of this research? *

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, I would like to be considered for the interviews!
- ☐ No, I am not interested in participating in the interviews.

Thank you for your participation in this survey, nothing additional is needed at this time, have a nice day!

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Google Forms

Appendix B - Informed Consent

Informed Consent Statement

Title of Study:

Why do Rural High School Teachers Remain in the Profession?

Introduction:

The Department of Education at Kansas State University values the ethical protection of all human subjects participating in research. This document provides essential information to help you make an informed decision about participating in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to decline or withdraw your consent at any time, without consequences to your grade or academic standing. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your decision will be respected, without penalty.

Purpose of the Study:

This study explores why rural high school teachers choose to remain in the profession, examining four different categories of capital as potential influencing factors. By analyzing participants' experiences, this research aims to provide insights into how these frameworks shape teacher retention in education.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be involved in the following activities:

- Submit an introductory survey which will be linked to an email sent to rural school districts in Kansas.
- Completing two semi-structured interviews* during the study (approximately 30 minutes each).
 - Please note that not all participants will be invited to take part in the interviews. Those who complete both interviews will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card.

All data is intended to be collected during the academic semester, and your participation will take place during the spring semester of 2025.

Risks:

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. Some prompts or discussions may lead to emotional reflection on your personal experiences with teaching and your opinions on why teachers have remained in or left their rural jobs. You may choose to pause or withdraw from participation at any time if you feel discomfort. Support resources will be available to you if needed.

Benefits:

Additionally, your participation may:

- Enhance your understanding of why teachers remain in the field of education.
- Contribute to the development of more effective teacher retention programs.
- Advance research on teacher retention in rural school districts.

Participant Confidentiality:

- Your privacy will be respected throughout this study.
- All data, including survey data and interview transcripts, will be anonymized by assigning each participant a unique code.
- Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the dissertation committee.
- Data will be securely stored on password-protected devices and deleted after one year.
- The study's final report or publication will not include your name or any identifying information.

Refusal to Sign Consent:

You have the right to decline to participate in this study.

Canceling this Consent:

You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. To do so, contact the researcher using the information provided below.

Questions About Participation:

If you have any questions about this study, you are encouraged to contact the researcher, Patrick O'Keefe.

Consent Statement:

I have read the information above and received a copy of this form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions regarding my participation in this study. By signing below, I consent to participate in this research.

Participant Agreement

- Print Participant's Name: _____
- Participant's Signature: _____
- Date: _____

Researcher Contact Information

Patrick O'Keefe
pjokeefe@ksu.edu

Major Professor Contact Information

Dr. Michael Lawson
mlawson1@ksu.edu

Kansas State IRB Office Contact Information

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785)532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Appendix C - Semi-Structured Interview Transcript #1

Semi-Structured Interview #1 Transcript

Introduction

- Welcome, and thank the participant for joining the interview.
- Read the interview protocol transcript introduction listed [here](#).
- Ensure the participant is ready for recording and begin.

Background Questions

- Can you tell me a little about yourself?
- How did you get into teaching and how long have you been teaching?
- Have you always taught at this school or have you held other teaching positions at other locations?
- What subjects and courses have you taught?

General Experiences and Understanding of Attrition and Retention

- Based on your experiences or observations, what are some reasons teachers leave the profession?
- Based on your experiences or observations, what are some reasons teachers leave the profession?
- In your experience, what factors contribute to teachers staying in the profession?"
- What actions can schools and districts take to support teacher retention?

Human Capital

- Can you describe any training opportunities provided by your school district? How effective do you find them?
 - Potential follow up: How do you think your school or district could improve its training or support systems?
- Can you describe any support or resources available to teachers at your school? How do they impact your work?
 - Potential follow up: What role do relationships with students, parents, or colleagues play in your professional satisfaction?
- How has your experience at this school influenced your professional growth, if at all?
 - Potential follow up: In what ways do you collaborate with your colleagues to enhance your teaching practices?
- What factors do you think influence teachers' decisions to stay at this school?
 - Potential follow up: How has the culture or leadership in your school shaped your experience as a teacher?

Closing

- Read the interview protocol transcript conclusion listed [here](#).
- Schedule follow-up session.
- Thank the participant for their time.

Appendix D - Semi-Structured Interview Transcript #2

Semi-Structured Interview #2 Transcript

Introduction

- Welcome, and thank the participant for joining the interview.
- Read the interview protocol transcript introduction listed [here](#).
- Ensure the participant is ready for recording and begin.

Social Capital

- Do your relationships with colleagues, students, or administrators influence your decision to remain a teacher? If so, how?
 - Potential follow up: How do collaborative relationships with your colleagues influence your day-to-day teaching experience?
- From your perspective, how would you describe the learning experience provided to students at your school?
 - Potential follow up: How do you think the learning experience at your school could be improved, and what changes would you suggest to enhance student outcomes?
- How do you perceive the level of trust and support from your administration and district officials?
 - Potential follow up: What role does school leadership play in fostering trust and strong relationships within your school?
- In what ways, if any, has parental or community involvement impacted your work as a teacher?
 - Potential follow up: How would you describe the level of collaboration between teachers, parents, and administrators at your school?

Structural Capital

- How would you describe your level of involvement in decisions that impact your role as a teacher?
 - Potential follow up: How would you describe the leadership structure at your school? Does it enable or restrict your ability to excel?
- Can you share an example, if any, of a time when your input was considered in a school or district decision?
 - Potential follow up: In what ways do school policies support teacher collaboration and innovation
- What school or district policies do you believe most influence student success, either positively or negatively?
 - Potential follow up: Are there any additional supports or tools that would enhance your success in your position?
- What professional growth opportunities, if any, are available at your school? How accessible do you find them?
 - Potential follow up: How does the school's culture or structure affect your ability to pursue long-term career goals?

Positive Psychological Capital

- How does your school support your well-being as a teacher, and are there any areas where additional support would be helpful?
 - Potential follow up: Can you share a specific example of a time when the school provided meaningful support for your well-being?
- What aspects of your role as a teacher do you find most fulfilling or enjoyable?
 - Potential follow up: Can you describe a recent moment in your teaching that felt particularly rewarding?
- Are there any aspects of teaching at this school that you particularly appreciate? If so, what are they?
 - Potential follow up: What impact do these appreciated aspects have on your decision to stay in the profession?
- What factors, if any, contribute to your sense of safety and belonging at this school?
 - Potential follow up: What could the school do to further strengthen a culture of safety and inclusivity for teachers?

Closing

- Read the interview protocol transcript conclusion listed [here](#).

Appendix E - Interview Protocol Transcript

Interview Protocol Transcript

Introduction

My name is Pat O'Keefe, and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. program for Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University. Thank you for participating in this interview, which will focus on the central question: **'Why do rural high school teachers remain in the profession?'** This interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

For documentation purposes, I would like to request permission to record our conversation. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you can ask to stop the recording. Your responses, as well as those of your peers, will help identify trends and provide insights into why rural high school teachers choose to remain in the profession.

Please note that your participation is completely voluntary. If you need to stop, take a break, or withdraw from the interview at any time, feel free to let me know. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? With your permission, we can start the interview. Do you agree?"

(Begin recording)

Conduct Interview

Conclusion:

"Thank you for your thoughtful answers. I truly appreciate your assistance with the research I am conducting. Have a great day!"

Appendix F - Questionnaire Email Draft

Survey Email Draft

Dear (School District Name/Superintendent),

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Patrick O'Keefe, and I am currently pursuing my Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University. I am reaching out to invite you to participate in my dissertation research, which explores the important question: *"Why do rural teachers stay in the profession"*

This study aims to understand the motivations, experiences, and challenges faced by rural high school teachers, with the goal of contributing valuable insights to support teacher retention and strengthen education in rural communities.

Your perspective as a rural high school teacher would provide critical insights into this topic. Participation would involve taking this brief introductory survey (linked below) and then for selected individuals you would be invited to participate in two semi-structured interviews at a time of your choosing.

Please rest assured that all information you provide will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact me at pjokeefe@ksu.edu. I would be happy to provide more details or address any concerns.

Thank you for considering this opportunity to contribute to research that aims to make a positive impact on the teaching profession in rural areas. I sincerely hope you will consider sharing your valuable insights.

[*Why do rural teachers stay in the profession survey?*](#)

Warm regards,
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